PS4 + XBOX ONE GAMES SPECIAL

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THE BEST OF E3
THE TITLES THAT WILL LEAD GAMING'S NEXT GENERATION

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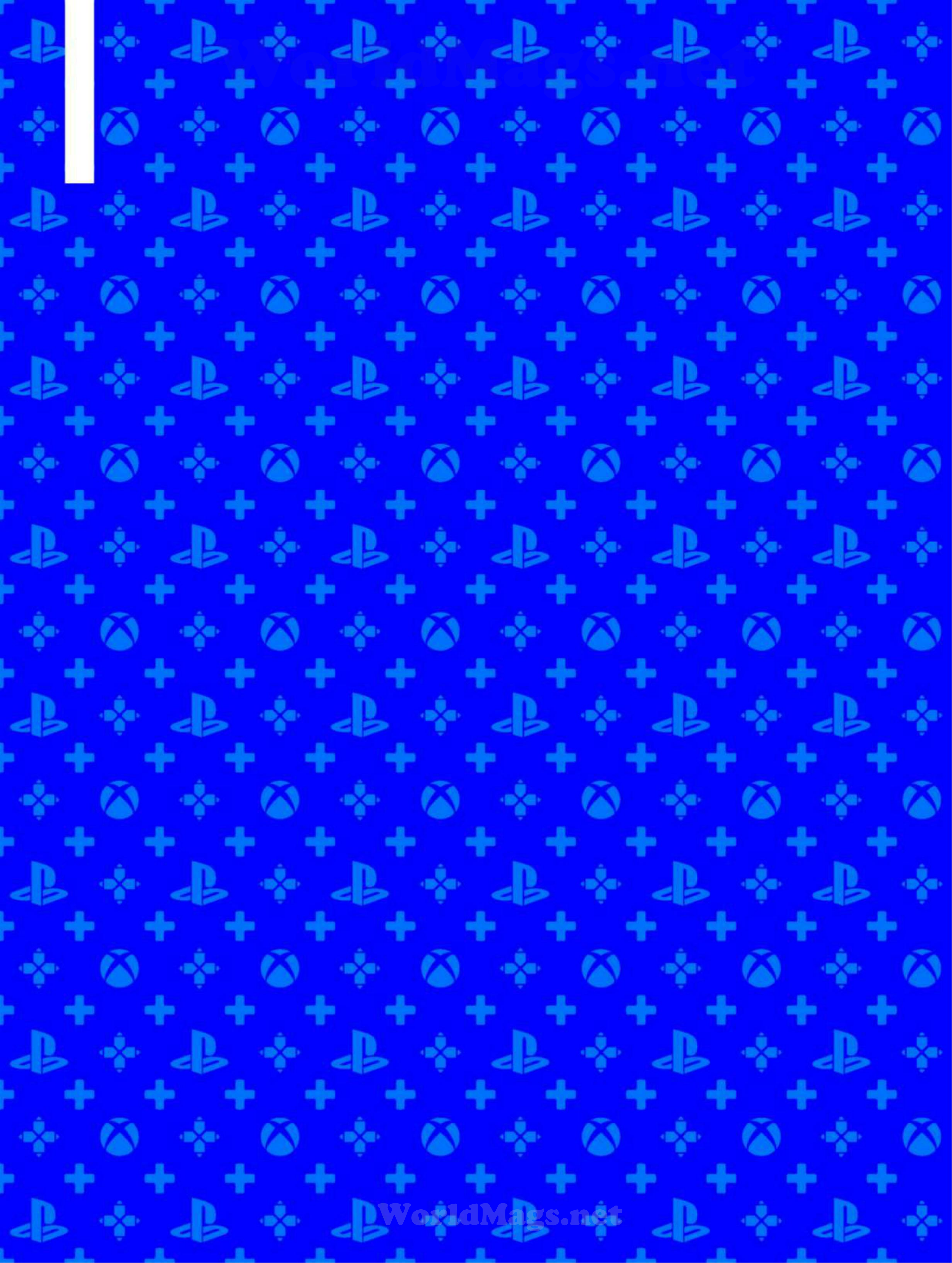
WHY THE ONLY OPTION RIGHT NOW IS **PS4**

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The value of knowing when to hold and when to fold

"We're not going to change anything. I mean, we're very happy with what we've done with Xbox One. We're very happy. Did you *see* the games on stage at our briefing? Did you see the exclusives? I mean, we're really, really proud of the system and the games that are coming out. I mean, when you look at games like *Titanfall* – have you gone through *Titanfall* yet? OK. Enough said. Conversation over."



Xbox Live director of programming **Larry 'Major Nelson' Hryb** there, answering a Reddit user who questioned how Microsoft might amend its strategy following Sony's PS4 event at E3. A week later, Hryb was eating those words as Microsoft changed its tune in a bid to placate the masses revolting against policies that sought to wedge obstacles between consumers and what consumers want to do (y'know: play videogames).

When Microsoft announced its policy revision, it was put to us that this was the most "ballsy" move imaginable. No. It was entirely the opposite, a frightened compromise. To hold its nerve and persevere with its strategy to its conclusion would have been the bold approach. As it is, Microsoft has revealed what we suspected: its confidence has been pulverised.

If Microsoft's climbdown wasn't ballsy, then how about Sony's activities at its E3 briefing, which saw it announce that it wouldn't put restrictions on the sale of preowned games, and that its console would operate happily without talking to the Internet? Again, no, this wasn't ballsy – it was the reverse. In maintaining the old world order, Sony is playing it safe. Which is precisely how the majority of its potential customers like it, regardless of how it may affect the way that console gaming evolves.

Even now that Microsoft has shifted its considerable bulk in an effort to more closely resemble its competitor, PS4 remains the more attractive offering. On p10, we look at how Sony has secured round one of the next-gen war, and from p40 onwards choose the defining games of E3.




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VLEDGE

Having revealed its hardware, Microsoft had to make its E3 showing all about the games. And it almost delivered – if you could stay focused on the demos and not get distracted by the furore generated by its initial DRM policies. By contrast, Sony had little new to show in the way of software, but revealed an attractive box designed with games at the top of its priorities list. But the most promising efforts came from thirdparty studios, ensuring that E3 for Sony and Microsoft was a bloody battle over policies, not games. Starting on p10, we report on how Sony triumphed (1), why Microsoft came up short, and what Nintendo's failure to inspire means for its future. But while the console landscape is a tumultuous one right now, PC gaming stands on firmer ground. That hasn't stopped *Runescape* (2) design director Mark Ogilvie from shaking the foundations, though, and on p16 we speak to him about returning the RPG genre to its tabletop roots and creating worlds that can be permanently changed by players. We report on the record-breaking tenth Nordic Game (3) on p18, and preview July's Develop Conference (4) on p20. Then in Soundbytes (5) on p22, Christofer Sundberg criticises short games, while Platinum's Atsushi Inaba addresses Hideki Kamiya's social media habits. Finally, NFL star Chris Kluwe tells us why he's obsessed with *Monster Hunter* in My Favourite Game (6) on p24.



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Sony lifts the trophy as Microsoft falters

PlayStation 4's focus on players makes it the clear winner at an E3 showcasing a new generation

E3 IN NUMBERS
This year's E3, which took place at the LA Convention Center from June 11–13, drew 48,200 attendees – up from 46,800 last year – from 102 countries across the globe. The city of Los Angeles is $40 million better off as a result of the show and the 28,000 hotel room bookings that came with it.





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Extensive coverage of E3 2013

At E3 1995, Sony Computer Entertainment America's **Steve Race** walked to the mic at his company's press conference, said just one thing – "299" – and left the stage. The shock news that the original PlayStation would debut at 100 dollars less than Sega's Saturn created the sort of impact marketing executives don't dare to fantasise about. It was an early battle lost for Sega in the 32bit war, which concluded with Sony's console destroying its competitor.

Three generations of hardware later, the parallels at Sony's briefing during E3 2013 were clear. Attendees' wild, roof-raising reaction to PS4's launch price – £349/$399, compared to £429/$499 for Xbox One – said it all.

Success in consumer electronics isn't merely about getting the price tag right. Apple's continued leadership with its comparatively expensive iPad shows how this market can be considerably less sensitive to pricing than others. Crucially, though, Apple's iPad leads its field in sales because it is widely regarded to be the best tablet device in existence, powered by the best software ecosystem. And it helps that Apple's brand equity remains so strong, giving iPads a level of desirability unmatched by any of their countless Android-powered competitors. Unfortunately for Microsoft, Sony's PS4 is a more powerful device than Xbox One. It's more developer-friendly, too, resulting in better software support. As for brand perception, Microsoft's DRM rethink means that it may no longer be in the toilet, but it's still dangling somewhere around the rim. That PS4 will be considerably cheaper than Xbox One is merely one of its various advantages.

In truth, it was always going to be easier for Sony to win E3 than lose it. Worldwide PS3 sales may have caught up to 360's in the latter part of this protracted console generation, but the console, and the company that made it, was dysfunctional in so many ways that it was obvious what Sony had to do to recover: fix everything. Unorthodox silicon was first out of the door, replaced by PS4's immeasurably



Press Association Images

Andrew House, president and CEO of SCE, revealed PS4's hardware in full at Sony's E3 conference. The console will launch before the year is out, and will be sold for £349/$399



In 2011, SCEA CEO Jack Tretton was apologising for a PSN hack. This year, he detailed PS4's lack of DRM and received a standing ovation



Microsoft's E3 conference highlight saw Hideo Kojima briefly taking the stage, but *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* is no Xbox exclusive – it's heading to Sony platforms too

more developer-friendly x86-based architecture. Next came PS3's poor online infrastructure, with its miserable patching process and download speeds; the new console promises automatic updates, cross-game chat and the ability to commence the playing of a game even as it's being downloaded. Buy *Killzone: Shadow Fall* from the PlayStation Store and you can choose between downloading the single or multiplayer component first. In time, Gaikai's cloud streaming will offer up the PlayStation back catalogue, fixing one of Sony's most reviled PS3 gaffes: removing backward compatibility to cut the cost of manufacture. (Sony talks a good game, but a timely reminder of PS3's travails came the week after E3 when a firmware update was hastily pulled after it rendered some consoles inoperable.)

Then there's controller design. DualShock 3 has certainly proved preferable to the 'boomerang' controller shown when PS3 was first unveiled, but its sole superiority over its 360 equivalent is its D-pad – something that's less of an issue now that Nintendo's longstanding patent has expired and Xbox One has adopted its design. PS4's new DualShock 4 is a good deal weightier than its flimsy-feeling predecessor, and the textured surface on its underside makes for a pleasingly comfortable feel in the hands. Gone are the convex analogue sticks that have featured on PlayStation controllers ever since PS1's *Ape Escape*; the new unit's offerings are concave and feature a ridged outer edge to reduce the possibility of thumbs slipping. More important is the new DualShock's internal design, which heightens stick sensitivity to address the deadzone gripes that have always been associated with Sony's controllers. Springy triggers, meanwhile, satisfyingly scratch the itch of the squishy DS3 equivalents. Xbox One's new controller works well in the hands, too, but it feels like a refinement because Microsoft's designers did such a convincing job with their work on 360's joypad. Sony's, in contrast, is more like a reinvention, and it speaks volumes that the PS4 controller was used for so many of the multiplatform games playable on E3's show floor.

> It speaks volumes that the PS4 controller was used for so many multiplatform games at E3

PS4's x86-based architecture doesn't just benefit developers of big-budget multiplatform games. Sony has been courting indie support avidly over the past 12 months to help plug the gap in Vita's release schedule while supporting PS3's Cross-Buy initiative, but it's far from a simple task for a small team to make a game for both Vita's structure and PS3's Cell processor. PS4 is a different story, and Sony's willingness to let indies both self-publish and release their games on PC (in some cases, we're led to believe, before PS4) has seen smaller developers swarm to the console. There may not be much to choose between the PS4 and Xbox One's launch lineups, but with indies and Sony's 17-strong Worldwide Studios network – only four of which will have games on shelves on day one – there's little doubt which of the two platform holders will offer the broadest range of games, at least early on. Some 140 titles are in development for PS4, 100 of which will be released in the console's first 12 months on sale.

Yet the real sea change lay in the messaging. What a shift this was from PS3's unveiling. Giant enemy crabs, Ken Kutaragi telling the world to get a second job, and that shocking $599 price tag? It all belongs to another generation. If February's PS4 launch event was aimed primarily at developers, E3 was where Sony positioned its new console as a powerful, consumer-friendly box that plays games first and foremost, and has players' best interests at its core. Microsoft's comedy of errors gave Sony what one developer described as three open goals and three balls. Even SCEA president Jack Tretton looked surprised at the reaction to the presentation slides that confirmed PS4 would play used games, that it wouldn't use always-on DRM, and that its users will be able to lend their game discs freely. There were standing ovations; some literally chanted Sony's name. How strange that the biggest cheers of E3 2013 surrounded a company simply maintaining the status quo. But that is the value of listening and responding to what your audience is saying, a vital tactic for a company that's spent most of the current generation languishing in third place. Sony won





THE HARDWARE

The DualShock 4 ① is a significant improvement on its predecessor. At 210g, it's almost ten per cent heavier than DualShock 3. It sports concave analogue sticks, much better triggers and a more ergonomic shape. Start and Select are gone, replaced by a single Options button. That input, and the new Share button, are placed high up the controller, either side of the clickable, capacitive touchpad. Like its predecessor, DualShock 4 uses a Micro USB cable to recharge, but can be tethered to all sorts of devices to draw power, not just a PS4. A dedicated charging station will also be made available.

The PS4 Eye camera ② won't, as previously thought, be bundled with the hardware, a key factor in Sony undercutting Xbox One's launch price. The 1,280x800-pixel camera handles facial recognition and supports picture-in-picture broadcasting.

The console itself ③ weighs in at 2.8kg, and resembles four blocks joined together. The disc slot ④, two USB ports ⑤ and glowing power indicator ⑥ are all hidden in the space between them. The angled body ⑦ isn't simply a design decision, either, giving you easy access to the disc tray and power ⑧ and eject ⑨ buttons at the front, while partly concealing cables connected at the back. The rear of the system isn't as busy as Xbox One's, with ports for power supply ⑩, optical audio ⑪, HDMI ⑫, Ethernet ⑬ and a third USB ⑭. The 500GB internal hard disk will – like PS3's – be replaceable.

PLUS POINT

Sony follows Microsoft's lead for PS4's online play

The PlayStation Plus subscription service has improved immeasurably in the 12 months since Sony introduced the Instant Game Collection and extended the service to cover Vita as well as PS3. It will be there on PS4 on day one, with a cut-down version of *DriveClub* and three indie games – *Don't Starve*, *The Secret Ponchos* and *Outlast* – confirmed for the following months. While Plus won't be required for automatic downloads of game and firmware updates, it will be for online multiplayer – a fact that Sony cannily mixed in with its show-stealing no-DRM reveal. Microsoft, of course, has been charging for online play for over a decade, and is now giving XBL Gold members two free 360 games each month.





hearts and minds in LA, and the battle. Now it has to keep the pressure applied.

Nintendo is under similar pressure, but for different reasons. While 3DS's growing pains are just a memory, the company came to E3 needing to justify Wii U's existence in the face of two much more powerful new consoles. As such, doing away with a traditional E3 press conference was the correct decision, though Nintendo's replacement – inviting media to its booth for a stage show and some hands-on time – could have gone better. Charles Martinet, voice of Mario, was on warm-up duties, speaking from backstage with a disembodied Mario head lip-syncing on the big screen. His Reggie Fils-Aime introduction ("Is your body ready?") hit the mark, but he had nowhere near enough material to fill the wearying 15 minutes that preceded it. After Fils-Aime had sought to capitalise on Microsoft's focus on services and content partnerships – with repeated, oddly aggressive demands that we all "play the game" – the developers of Nintendo's big E3 games were wheeled out, accompanied by translators, speaking over each other on a small semi-circular stage in the middle of a room hardly set up for acoustics. Little matter: we could see the translators' teleprompter.

While Nintendo had plenty of games at the show, there were few surprises – a natural, though disappointing consequence of the frequent Nintendo Direct broadcasts – and what was on show suggested that the company's attempt to do E3 differently had not carried over to its development philosophy. Mario, Zelda, Yoshi and Donkey Kong were all playable on the show floor as Nintendo's age-old reliance on established IP deepened further. A Wii U price cut would have helped build an installed base before PS4 and Xbox One show up and change everything, but evidently that was too much of a risk for a company that only recently scraped back into the black and is already selling the console at a loss. There was plenty of fan service here, but little for anyone else, and the show floor painted a clear picture of a thirdparty Wii U scene that has all but dried up. It seems Nintendo's immediate focus is on selling as many games as possible to those who have already bought Wii Us, and hoping hardware sales pick up down the line.





From top: Christofer Sundberg, founder of Avalanche Studios; Jonathan Morin, creative director on *Watch Dogs*



Nintendo's nontraditional show was the right decision in the face of two proper next-gen consoles. But the event had little to offer that Nintendo Directs hadn't already shown, and a sense of stagnation hung over it

Out on E3's show floor, the big theme was connectivity – and not only in terms of the constant talk of Microsoft's always-on masterplan. There was no little developer frustration at that, but it was aimed not at DRM itself but the fuss surrounding it, which was directing attention away from the games themselves.

Despite Microsoft's humiliating post-E3 climbdown, E3 2013 carried the message that next-generation gaming involves having a permanent connection to the Internet. "For me, [next gen] is about what we do with videogames in terms of connectivity, the way DICE is doing with [*Battlefield 4*'s] Commander mode. It's just amazing," **Christofer Sundberg**, whose Avalanche Studios unveiled its long-rumoured open-world *Mad Max* game at the show, tells us. "It will be a natural part of every game. Look at what they did in *Journey*, for example, and *The Walking Dead*, giving you feedback on your choices. When you have connectivity, there's no need for [DRM] systems like that."

Look at Ubisoft's next-gen slate: there's *The Crew*, an MMO racer, and *Tom Clancy's The Division*, an RPG-shooter built from the ground up with multiplayer and connected devices in mind. Even the cross-gen, singleplayer-focused *Watch Dogs* has a *Dark Souls*-style invasion mechanic. On this evidence, seamlessly integrated co-operative and competitive play will define the next generation, adding tangible gameplay benefits to being connected to the Internet and allowing the concept of tacked-on multiplayer to be killed off once and for all. No wonder devs were frustrated: Microsoft distracted from their coming-out parties with system-level DRM rendered pointless by their having integrated a positive equivalent at a gameplay level.

In other words, it's about serving the player first and the company second. Little wonder, then, that Sony's positioning at E3 looked so appealing.

"I think the generation we're looking at now is past the concept of the box defining it," **Jonathan Morin**, creative director on *Watch Dogs*, tells us. "I think people who make consoles now need to listen to players. There are people who make games who, in their head, it's more like they're on a stage doing a rock show and the players are fans watching the stage. Personally, I thinking making a game is making music and sharing it, giving it to the player. What's hard is we have to teach them to play guitar in order for them to express themselves."

When the next generation of consoles arrives, the best place for players to do that will be on PS4. In turning things around, Microsoft faces the kind of challenge that once drove the mighty Sega out of the hardware business. ■

XBOX ONE'S ROAD TO RUIN

An expensive, innovative console marred by arrogance and cluelessness

Price and product put Microsoft in the lead for the entire 360/PS3 generation, but for now the world isn't ready for Xbox One, and neither is Microsoft. On day one its TV services will favour the United States, there will be no games to justify the new Kinect sensor, SmartGlass will still make little sense to all but the most committed of players, and the 'publishers first, gamers second' policy decisions Microsoft worked so hard to recant after E3 will still be evident in its dearth of indie games – available in abundance on its rival's platform.

In every way, Microsoft had the more difficult job in building its own next-generation console. Sony has spent the best part of seven years addressing the policy decisions that poisoned PS3 from its first weeks on shelves, but Microsoft's Xbox 360 was a more balanced platform, with deeper foundations. The next Xbox would need to be a revolution or it would be a disappointment. In the end, it was both.

Microsoft's blunders began months before the console's May 21 announcement when details of the machine's demand for an always-on Internet connection escaped the campus. Xbox One's 24-hour authentication system, announced on May 21, may have been a response to the ensuing outrage, or it may not. Either way, the result was the same. Xbox One was announced with authentication systems and a game-trading policy so complex that even the company's execs were conflicted over their workings, and the world said "no".

Just nine days after it failed to address the wildly unpopular policy at its E3 conference, Microsoft backed down and announced Xbox One's revised online authentication and trading policy (in brief: you won't have to, and you can). It was the final compromise for One, denying it Microsoft's vision of an always-connected console.

But this was a battle Microsoft never needed to fight. The headline titles at E3 had their own game-side DRM of sorts – online features so desirable that few players would ever want their console offline. Cloud-based driver AI in *Forza 5*, cross-game invasions in *Watch Dogs* and the half-dozen new console-bound MMOGs all make a more convincing argument for an Ethernet cable in the back of your Xbox One than Microsoft's dream of tying your game library to your account ever did. PC gamers accepted online authentication for digital games years ago and had all but rejected the notion of discs long before that. Industry trends are on Microsoft's side, but weeks of mixed messages and unpopular policies took deep root. The company is a difficult one to trust.

> The next Xbox would need to be a revolution or it would be a disappointment. It was both

Xbox One should have been the light at the end of a tunnel stacked to the ceiling with hardware and software experiments consumers rejected for very similar reasons. Zune, Windows Phone, Surface and Windows 8 all arrived too late with features that arrived too early. Zune was an iPod with built-in social networking nobody cared about until the rise of Spotify and Last FM; Windows Phone and Surface debuted a clean and customisable interface at a time when Apple's defectors were migrating to almost infinitely customisable Android devices. And Windows 8 is a touchscreen interface for a world without touchscreens. Microsoft has consistently misjudged consumers' expectations for phones, tablets and desktop operating systems and now its stab at the future of game consoles seems equally confused. Xbox One is your game console, your TV box, your videophone and your Internet browser at a time when game players still just want to play.

Worse, upon its release in November, the hardware will make a poor case for its defining features.





This was Phil Harrison's first appearance on stage at E3 wearing Microsoft colours, announcing Xbox One's indie lineup, whose number looked pitiful against PS4's

Five years from now, when every HDMI-enabled device speaks One's language, regional standards have been adopted by One's TV functions, disc-based titles are outsold by digital and calling friends via Skype is as normal as picking up a phone, Xbox One will be ready for the mainstream. In 2013, it's a system with a daunting pricetag, a muddled message, and a thousand alienated developers calling for change. Sound familiar?

In 2005, Sony's early messaging painted the expensive PS3 as a console worth getting a second job for. There was the boomerang controller Sony that quickly replaced with the Sixaxis, which was itself replaced by Dual Shock 3. There was the baffling online infrastructure and the awkward system architecture, which troubled premium developers and made sure that almost any game's PlayStation version was its worst. In many ways, Microsoft now feels like Sony then, with arrogant (and, worse, ignorant) messaging, flipflop policy changes and inconsistent online plans. To really rub it in, it's also alienated the most vibrant development community in the modern era.

It was as important for Sony to court Epic and EA at the beginning of the current generation as it is to bring independent developers to PS4 today. Microsoft's Live Arcade helped kickstart the indie boom alongside PCs and mobiles, but eight years later the company is clinging to the ancient rulebook and denying Xbox One a world of independent games. Sony's allowance for self-publishing means any developer of any size can bring games to PS4, while Xbox One developers need the backing of a publisher and guaranteed exclusivity to Microsoft's platforms. Immediately, Polytron's Phil Fish took *Fez 2* from Xbox One's table, and Bohemia's Dean Hall explained that *DayZ* can only come to consoles whose patching process is free of charge, and where self-publishing is allowed. These titles are just two of what may become hundreds of losses for Microsoft's system and therefore de facto PS4 exclusives.

Sony enters the next generation with its mistakes patched: the right price, a clear and consistent message, robust online, and friendly hardware that amounts to PC architecture in an attractive box. Seven years after PS3's disastrous debut, the generation-defining mistakes are Microsoft's. Sixteen exclusive titles at E3 made a strong argument for One as a game console, but already the games are trapped in the shadow of Microsoft's mythical magic box that solves a hundred problems you never cared about solving in the first place. Technically, creatively, *morally*, the world isn't ready for Xbox One, and neither is Microsoft, which has elected to pitch a convergence device that will be useful tomorrow against a PlayStation competitor whose benefits are obvious today.



RuneScape 3's new HTML5 client promises to beautify Gielinor, but giving players the power to reshape the world is the more important ramification of this latest sequel

Back to the table

RuneScape 3 is aiming to take the RPG back to its tabletop roots and make storytelling agents of us all

Perhaps more than any other MMOG, *RuneScape*'s climate is shaped as much by its users as its creators. Jagex understands that player agency is what sets RPGs apart, which isn't surprising, since its flagship game was dreamt up by a team with extensive experience of tabletop roleplaying. *RuneScape 3*, rolling out this summer, draws from this heritage by giving players the chance to change Gielinor's topography forever, asking them to side with deities in an ongoing battle for power. Design director **Mark Ogilvie** reveals the lie of the land.

As a Dungeons & Dragons player, which parts of tabletop RPGs do you feel are under-represented in their videogame equivalents?
One crucial ingredient that's often forgotten is the role of the Dungeon Master, that individual ability to modify the story, to iterate and change the narrative's direction in response to how players are engaging with the story in realtime. Boxed products don't have that agility, and until the dawn of DLC and patches couldn't respond to player feedback at all. With our browser client and commitment to weekly updates, I feel *RuneScape* is best placed to bridge the gap between the two [media]. That's why we're making a renewed effort to design content where players make meaningful decisions that dictate the next part of the story.

To make decisions truly meaningful they have to impact the game at both the individual and community level, right?
Our solution to that is to introduce a clock. Our world is currently full of quests that can be tackled anytime, anywhere, but we want to introduce finite content – stuff that can't be recycled, that can only be influenced by players that are playing the game there and then. These come in the form of constantly evolving World Events that come round in a three-month cycle. These events allow players to redefine the world [according to] their vision, whatever the cost to us. By placing a time limit on such events, we hope to create an environment where the players who were there are remembered and recognised by future communities for the action they took and the way they shaped the world for the next generation.

> "Games seem to be moving away from subscription models, but it's not something we want to do"

How did the Wilderness controversy of 2007 affect the way that you engage with players?
That was a communication issue. The effect bots were having on the in-game economy affected the way players approached the game, and we didn't have the tech back then to fight it properly. The only thing we could do was remove PvP battles. While this fixed the problem to some extent, the downside was that it removed a core interaction, and the fanbase were very vocal about that.

We've learned so much since then and nowadays spend more time in conversation with the community – either through message boards or at RuneFest events, where we actually pitch ideas to them. As an example, we recently reworked and expanded the combat system to make it more tactile. This wasn't a change we could make lightly, since we learned most of our players engage with our game in a passive way. They're almost like passengers, multitasking *RuneScape* with other windows, such as chat, YouTube, whatever. So we had to devise a system that was more involved without sacrificing low-level input.

I PREDICT A RIOT
Large-scale in-game protests are common in *RuneScape*, dating back to the Rule 7 riot of 2007, sparked by Jagex banning thirdparty clients from the interface. There are many reasons for riots, from trade imbalances to the introduction of 'freemium' mechanics. While demonstrations allow players to let off steam, Jagex says it's an unproductive way to protest. The Wilderness dispute of 2007, for example, was solved not with disruption but via negotiation. When it was technically feasible to do so, Jagex opened new servers that restored the old rules.

Players can be resistant to change. How do you deal with that?
We find different players are motivated by different aspects – story, community, [completionism] – and it's our job to ensure each of these motivations are stimulated at some point within the three-year cycle. We don't try to make every quest appeal to everyone, though; we'd be foolish to do that. We have so much content coming thick and fast that our players know if they don't like something [then] there'll likely be something around the corner that they do like.

Freemium is a hot topic. Which rival business models impress you?
I love what EA are doing with stuff like FIFA Ultimate Team. The booster pack system evokes memories of the likes of Magic: The Gathering. It's a different way of providing choice to the user – to allow them to augment their experience with microtransactions without feeling railroaded into it. It's interesting that games seem to be moving away from subscription models, but it's not something we want to do [while free to play, *RuneScape* also has a membership programme]. Although we've introduced microtransactions, I don't think it would work if we started to paywall off critical content, such as quests. Players shouldn't have to feel forced to engage with microtransactions. The subscription model is cleaner and clearer, and I think works better for us. ■



Jagex design director Mark Ogilvie has praised *RuneScape*'s episodic nature, but also promises that *RuneScape 3* will be more focused on a central storyline



Northern highlights

The tenth annual Nordic Game conference puts in its biggest showing yet in a record-breaking show

The Nordic Game Conference celebrated its tenth anniversary this year with a record-breaking attendance of more than 1,400 delegates and some memorable sessions. Taking place in the Slagthuset in Malmö, Sweden, the main event was bolstered by Unity's Unite Nordic event, which itself gathered around 600 developers, plus an indie night that attracted over 800 visitors.

Preconference events aside, it was Double Fine's **Tim Schafer** who kicked off this year's proceedings, delivering an opening keynote in which he used Double Fine's Amnesia Fortnights to illustrate the importance of "inspiration-driven development". If someone at Double Fine cares enough about a project, he said, it will get made. The talk also touched on Kickstarter, of course, with Schafer underscoring the fact that while the crowdfunding site won't kill off traditional publishers, it will catalyse better deals for developers and provide new options. And Schafer continues to believe that independence supports creativity. "Before starting Double Fine," he revealed to the assembled developers, "I considered all my opportunities as something granted to me by other people."

Patrick Liu followed up Schafer's opening session by explaining to the crowd why he left DICE and *Battlefield* behind for *Angry Birds* last year when he became creative director of Rovio's newly founded Stockholm studio. He was careful to reiterate his continued respect for DICE, but was inspired to switch employers by his desire to remain on the cutting edge of current trends. Even more important to Liu is the age of unbridled creativity – for better or worse – that mobile development has ushered in.

> The real money, Heydon concluded, lies in mobile game ads, not the games themselves

Sticking with mobile revelations, **Barry Meade**, a former Bullfrog and Criterion artist and subsequent founder of Fireproof Games, offered attendees some insight into the creation of his studio's spooky iPad puzzler *The Room*. The experience of building a project for iOS in Unity, he said, "upended how we thought about game development. *The Room* cost [just] three people for six months".

But Matthew Boch, project director at Harmonix, had creativity of a different type in mind. Boch spoke about how players' ability to impose their own fashion sense, slang or even sexual preferences on a game world changes the stories that can be told, and the meaning of our interactions. Using *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* as examples, he explored the imposed differences between male and female avatars and asked whether players' actions towards certain fictional races could be construed as racist.

Such profound and unchecked industry change requires new strategies, and London Venture Partners managing director **Paul Heydon** echoed Schafer's call for independence, though in the same breath criticised developers – especially European ones – for failing to live up to their potential. "You don't need a lot of money or large teams," he said. "You need to work fast, be innovative, and take a step back and make games for a large potential user base. You need to think big. Really big." And the real money, he concluded somewhat bleakly, lies in mobile game ads, not the games themselves.

10th nordicgame CONFERENCE MALMÖ, 22-24 MAY 2013





From top: Double Fine's Tim Schafer and Unity's David Helgason

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS
While this year's main Unite conference takes place in Vancouver this August, Unite Nordic was one of several smaller conferences that have been spreading the reach of the event. Like its larger sibling, Unite Nordic consisted of sessions from Unity's engineers on getting the most out of the engine, developer presentations and a keynote from co-founder David Helgason (who also provided a Nordic Game session on mobile development).

Telltale Games kicked off day two with a charming keynote panel consisting of sound engineer Jory Prum, senior cinematic artist Eric Parsons and two of the voice actors from *The Walking Dead*, Nicki Rapp (Lilly Caul) and David Fennoy (Lee Everett). The group guided audience members through the challenge of writing, casting, recording for and directing an episodic game series, making each other laugh as much as the audience along the way.

Meanwhile, former Naughty Dog designer **Richard Lemarchand** detailed his journey from working in the game industry to teaching those who want to get into it – he's now a visiting associate professor on the University of Southern California's Media and Games programme – and what he brought with him to teaching from that earlier life.

"[Naughty Dog creative director Amy Hennig taught me] the importance of vulnerability. It's the vulnerability in Nathan Drake that engages us," he said, before moving on to speaking about the realities of game education.

"The most learning occurs when you hit a problem that you just can't solve. Learning is about pain and catharsis… [but] you can make a game about anything, especially if you are interested in everything." ■



Developing the future

Keynote speakers target gaming's next generation at the UK's industry conference in Brighton

On July 9–11, Britain's game industry conference Develop looks to the future, with next-generation platforms, retail models and cloud-based opportunities headlining the three-day event. And among the wealth of expert speakers lined up, there are plenty of highlights to watch out for.

Develop's week begins with its Evolve day, focusing exclusively on the next generation of industry trends. Microsoft Lift London's Lee Schuneman kicks things off, talking cloud-based gaming and the 'beyond the box' experiences Microsoft is taking to its cloud-enabled Surface, Windows Phone, Windows 8 and Xbox One. Lift London has been cloaked in secrecy since Microsoft Studios London was rebranded in January, and the talk is Schuneman's first chance to discuss with fellow developers the projects his team has been working on.

The day continues with a talk from Sony's Dave Ranyard on the lessons learned from embedding *Singstar* in PS3's front-end and turning it into a free-to-play title. It's the first of several free-to-play presentations, and leads straight into Pocket Gamer's Jon Jordan discussing metrics for measuring and ranking the success of competing F2P titles, Marvelous AQL's Harry Holmwood exploring the F2P opportunities in the profitable Japanese market, and Supermassive's Ollie Purkiss breaking down the studio's difficult transition from console development to free-to-play.

Evolve is also a goldmine for design and business, with talks on the databases behind *Hitman Absolution*'s user-generated Contracts mode, breaking into the huge Chinese market, designing casual, browser-based point-and-click adventures, and how to adapt existing and new games to Android-based TV consoles such as GameStick and Ouya.

The body of Develop's conference begins on Wednesday morning as Sony's Mark Cerny takes to the main stage to discuss next-generation development and PlayStation 4. The industry veteran joined Atari in 1982 and later worked with Sega in the United States and Japan. He's now PlayStation 4's lead architect and the driving force behind the console's PC-like foundation and friendlier development model. Following his appearances at the consumer-facing PS4 reveal and E3 conference, this will be Cerny's first time talking directly to the development community in a public forum.

> For UK-based developers there's a special session dedicated to what makes a game 'culturally British'

Directly afterwards, an **Edge** 20th anniversary session will take place, looking at what games have achieved since the magazine's launch in 1993. Running concurrently, Berni Good of Cyberpsychology Limited will explore psychopathy in game characters, why characters sitting firmly in the uncanny valley so often appear to wear the expressions of killers, and what game artists can do about it. After lunch, John Holland from Big Fish will ask where the 'real money' is in game development, considering cloud gaming, mobile, free-to-play and the existing console and PC business models. Later, Rodeo Games' Ben Murch and Laurent Maguire recount the story of how they came to work with Games Workshop on *Warhammer Quest*, from their early meeting with the boardgame's designer on an aeroplane to redesigning the game for iOS and working with their childhood heroes. The day ends with a panel gameshow hosted by The Guardian's Keith Stuart, as industry veterans construct a game based on suggestions shouted from the audience in Whose Game Is It Anyway?

Throughout the day, a dedicated Indie Games programme will host back-to-back sessions on successful Kickstarter campaigns, marketing indie titles, the long tail of popular independent games, and the evolution of a news story from press release to PR disaster with statistics from a PR professional and Develop Magazine's editor, Will Freeman.

BRIGHTON PEERS
The 2013 Develop Awards take place on July 10. There are almost 100 finalists, and there's a satisfying indie presence among them. *The Room* developer Fireproof Games leads with five nominations, including Best Use Of Narrative and Best Visual Arts. In addition, *Hotline Miami* creator Dennaton Games, *Dishonored*'s Arkane Studios, *Wonderbook*'s SCE London Studio and Playground Games' *Forza Horizon* have amassed four nods each. Supercell's *Clash Of Clans*, meanwhile, is up against the likes of *Warface*, *Dishonored* and *Hotline Miami* for Best New IP.



The highlight of Develop's third day is a mid-morning talk by Epic founder Tim Sweeney. He'll reveal the lessons learned since Epic was established in 1991, and how the studio weighs trends in graphics cards, CPUs, game design and mobile platforms in its ongoing development of Unreal Engine. Sweeney will also discuss where Epic sees game and engine development going over the course of the Xbox One and PS4 generation.

For UK-based developers there's a special session hosted by UKIE's Jo Twist dedicated to what makes a game 'culturally British'. With lessons taken from the film industry, Twist and a panel of experts will discuss how government guidelines can be understood and how adherence to the rules can allow small and large studios to qualify for tax breaks. Later, The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck will discuss the studio's life from mod team to startup to sustainable enterprise through *Dear Esther* and *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*. ■

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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"We are to blame. We relaxed our [marketing] efforts so consumers today still can't understand what's so good… about Wii U. It takes some energies on our side to make people understand the real attractions of what we are doing."

It's not your fault that you don't understand Wii U, according to Nintendo's **Satoru Iwata**.

"Mr Kamiya expresses opinions on social media, and those are **his opinions.** So you do get a true sense of what kind of person he is, and that's sort of something that can't be helped."

Platinum Games boss **Atsushi Inaba** addresses the colourful Twitter volleys of *The Wonderful 101* creator Hideki Kamiya.

"[Second-hand games have] been an issue, but **that's because games have been too short.** When you can play a game through [in] eight to ten hours, I would return it too."

Avalanche founder **Christofer Sundberg**'s game shelf may be more fresh air than games.



"I wouldn't say that **I've ever made a bad game** per se, but a game I think we could have done more with was *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*."

Twenty-five years is still a long winning streak for **Shigeru Miyamoto**.

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Guilty Gear Xrd SIGN
Manufacturer Arc System Works

Arc System Works announced the unpronounceable *Guilty Gear Xrd SIGN* at its annual fighting game tournament, ArcRevo, marking the series' return to arcades with a new title for the first time since 2002's *Guilty Gear XX*.

Along the way *XX* got upgrades in the form of *#Reload*, *Slash*, *Accent Core*, *Accent Core Plus* and then *Accent Core Plus R* in 2012, which itself got a patch in January. With every sequel and update, *Guilty Gear* has slid further into the clutches of the hardcore, and the already complex game has become almost unplayable to anyone outside of fighting game tournaments and Japanese arcades. Arc System Works' decision to focus its efforts on *BlazBlue* was a response to *Guilty Gear*'s complexity, but with *BlazBlue* now into its sixth update and well on its way to being ghettoised by its growing pool of mechanics, it's time for Arc to return to the series on which the studio was built.

X and *XX* were to *Guilty Gear* what *Turbo* and *Super Turbo* were to *Street Fighter II*, and *Guilty Gear 2* was a bizarre tactical action game exclusive to 360, making *Xrd SIGN* arguably the first true *Guilty Gear* sequel. It also marks the series' move into 3D, with the intricate hand-drawn sprites of the previous games replaced with cel-shaded polygons pushed around by Unreal Engine 3. They'll be used for another 2D fighter with dramatic camera angles for pre-baked combos, which will be powered by the Sega RingEdge 2 board so far used only by *Accent Core Plus R*. For now, there's no cabinet, nor any publicly playable build, but it's a longterm bet on the future of Japanese arcades. Series creator Daisuke Ishiwatari is expected to appear at E3 2014 as part of the game's preview tour and to announce it for next-gen consoles.

My Favourite Game
Chris Kluwe

The NFL punter and political activist discusses his RPG obsession, gaming fanatics and telling great stories

After eight years with the Minnesota Vikings, National Football League punter **Chris Kluwe** has now announced he'll be joining the Oakland Raiders. What's perhaps less broadly known about this pro athlete is how he balances his *Monster Hunter* addiction alongside his political activism and sport.

What are you playing at the moment?
I've been playing a lot of *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate*, actually. I'm up to the six-star G-rank quests, so I'm just finishing those off to get to the seven-star ones. It's been a lot of fun just hunting down monsters and taking their parts from them.

***Monster Hunter* is known for devouring people's lives. Do you have an addictive personality with certain games?**
Yeah, I can definitely get that way, and this is one of them. I think I have about 150 hours in it already. The thing that's great is that you can transfer it back and forth between Wii U and 3DS. So whenever I go travelling – and I travel a lot – I can just take it on 3DS and pass the time on planes, which is awesome.

Your Twitter handle is @ChrisWarcraft. What led you to enshrine that particular game in such a visible way?
Back before I was on Twitter, one of the local radio stations in Minnesota that I was on frequently had been talking about when [NFL wide receiver] Chad Johnson changed his name to Chad Ochocinco, [and] that I should change my name to Chris Warcraft, because I played a lot of *World Of Warcraft* at the time. Obviously I'm not going to do that. But when they convinced me to get on Twitter, I was like, "I should go with Chris Warcraft." It wasn't taken, so that's what I went with.

THE MIND SIDE
Chris Kluwe began overachieving at a young age, becoming a prodigious violinist before he was ten. Today he showcases his musical talents as the bass player for a rock outfit called Tripping Icarus. Despite being an accomplished student – he achieved a perfect score on the verbal portion of the SAT standardised exam – he decided to pursue a career in professional athletics. He later spent four years in one of the US's top-ranked *World Of Warcraft* guilds, The Flying Hellfish. His first book, a collection of rants and personal essays, underlines his range of talents.



What were the games or consoles that first cemented your passion for gaming?
I started gaming when I was five or six with the NES. I don't know if I could define any one thing that hooked me on videogames. It was just the idea that here was this world and I was controlling a character in that world… They felt like puzzle exercises; it was mentally stimulating to figure stuff out. And, if done properly, you can tell a great story in a game. It's like having an interactive book.

"Look at games like Shadow Of The Colossus or BioShock and there's a story to be told there"

There's been a lively debate over whether games are well suited to telling stories. Do you find the conflict between agency and authorship problematic at all?
It really just depends on how the developer implements it. You look at games like *Journey* or *Shadow Of The Colossus* or *BioShock* and there's a story to be told there. You are experiencing that story as you go through the game. Really it comes down to how much effort does the developer want to put into it, and how much effort does the player want to put into getting that story out.

Speaking of the *BioShock* series, have you played *Infinite* yet?
I'm working through it right now. I've discovered my FPS skills have declined as I've got older. Playing on Hard difficulty may have been a poor choice. I grew up playing shooters. I was playing *Counter-Strike* on the PC when I was 12 or 13, so I've been playing FPSes most of my life, and I was pretty good at them. I've found that the reflexes have kind of diminished at the ripe old age of 31. But Irrational does an amazing job of presenting a fully realised world…

As a pro athlete, you've witnessed the tribalism of sports fans up close. Are gamers more or less intense?
I'd say they're both equally intense and they're both equally stupid. When you go into that fanatic mode where you say, "This is the only thing that matters and everything else is garbage," you're limiting your opportunities. You're limiting what games you have available to you and the experiences you can have in life. Life shouldn't be exclusionary; we should be looking for those new experiences.

OK, favourite game of all time?
Final Fantasy VI for the Super Nintendo, which is probably the best videogame of all time. I love RPGs and *Final Fantasy VI* had an amazing story… The really cool thing [is], when you get to the halfway point of the game when the world cracks, at that point you're thinking it's the end of the game. [Then] you have the final boss showdown and then the entire world changes and the game goes on. I was like, "This is amazing." I'd never seen a game do that before. ■



Sport is only one aspect of Kluwe's life. He's also a family man, lifelong gamer, author and plays bass in rock band Tripping Icarus. His debut book of essays, titled Beautifully Unique Sparkleponies, is out now

WEBSITE
Rice Digital
www.ricedigital.co.uk
Part Japanese gaming blog, part online shop, Rice Digital is an experiment from the team behind *BlazBlue* and *Persona 4 Arena*'s western releases. Former game journalist Geraint Evans oversees the editorial content, while the shop trades in the handful of Japanese indie games translated into English. It's a lineup currently heavily weighted towards shooters and the occasional RPG, but in April Rice pulled off a coup in securing fighter *Yatagarasu* from creator Kotani Tomoyuki and translating it. It's the highlight of a growing catalogue of games from a community that was until recently an outsider on the indie stage. Rice Digital is now almost a platform in itself, and it's certainly the best place for westerners to explore premium indie efforts from Japan.





VIDEO
***Conker's Bad Fur Day* Commentary**
www.bit.ly/1aC8xOM
Twelve years after *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was released on N64, designer Chris Seavor, programmer Chris Marlow, composer Robin Beanland, and programmer Shawn Pile got together to drink and cuss their way through the game in a fitting tribute to Rare's debauched cartoon rodent. In between all the C-words, they reveal the programming miracles that made *Conker* possible without a RAM pack, and explain why a character's animation when they meet a wall is the litmus test for any game's quality.

WEB GAME
King Of Bees
www.bit.ly/12h7YCj
After the hi-def bombardment of E3, Brendan Patrick Hennessy's comedy text adventure offers a calming return to simpler times. Inspired by the poor western localisation of late-'80s/early-'90s Japanese games, *King Of Bees* casts you as Space Knight, a representative of Earth charged with killing the titular evil ruler. Presented as if it were the text from an 8bit game, you progress through several zones on your way to the Bee Fort to find your quarry. You can carry out your mission with cold efficiency if you choose, but things aren't as simple as they first seem. Hennessy's dialogue hits the target, lampooning the games it emulates as well as more contemporary examples, and you'll want to play through a couple of times just to tease out every possible scenario and see every ending.

FIRST OFFICER STOPS YOUR DEPART: "SPACE KNIGHT, IT IS SPACE REGULATION TO NOT ENTER NEW AREAS WITHOUT A SPACE GUN."
1 - GET INFO
2 - ITEM SALVAGE

THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A smattering of things that caught our attention during the production of **E**256

CONSOLE
Project MOJO
This generation has been transformative for Mad Catz, its arcade sticks seeing it replace Hori as the fighting game fan's peripheral maker of choice. It's now moving into the crowded microconsole arena, but Project MOJO isn't like its competition. While Ouya runs on Nvidia's 18-month-old Tegra 3 processor, Mad Catz is targeting a higher spec. Unlike its peers, it'll be completely open, with no walled marketplace. With a bundled Bluetooth controller and no cut of software sales, MOJO will have to be profitable on day one; Mad Catz has yet to offer an RRP, but don't expect GameStick's pricing.

continue

Peter Moore
Warmed up the crowd at EA's E3 event like your favourite uncle

E3 buzz
New hardware, new IP, renewed confidence: is everyone ready to make money again?

SmartGlass
The Division, *Project Spark* and *Battlefield 4* make arguments at last

PS3's long tail
Puppeteer, *Rain* – who needs next gen?

quit

Peter Moore
What, no *Mirror's Edge 2* tattoo? You're slipping, Pete

E3 blaggers
Uh, isn't StreetPass management and all that swag getting in the way of your work?

The Last Guardian
"It still exists," but you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise

DRM distractions
Microsoft's mess muddied a strong E3



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TWEETS
If you have questions about our ability to deliver on adapting iconic work w/respect & reverence, go play *The Beatles Rock Band*. I'll wait.
John T Drake @johntdrake
Director of Communications, Harmonix

Idea to fix ludonarrative dissonance: stop making games about mass murder.
Phil Fish @PHIL_FISH
Fez *creator*

I know I can disable the Kinect, but I don't even want it plugged in, it's creepy. I guess I'll just wrap mine in duct tape and submerge it.
Markus Persson @notch
Minecraft *creator*

Happy because a goat sent me a toilet in a letter. Who needs drugs when there's *Animal Crossing* eh.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Llamasoft founder



DISPATCHES AUGUST

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss E3. You tell us why Microsoft won, why Nintendo lost and why we don't need more of this posturing graphical one-upmanship in any case. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** tells us why *Aliens: Colonial Marines* failed, and why you just can't make an Aliens game; **Leigh Alexander** longs for the early days of the Internet, and explains why gaming can't afford to be as insular; and **Brian Howe** takes an odd flight with an even odder Shuhei Yoshida and a plane full of bewildered indie developers.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 255

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

I want One

So the E3 press conferences have been and gone, with the popular belief that Microsoft is already knocked out, and the console war's been won before a piece of kit has been sold. But I think the gaming public is wrong, that Microsoft has the superior piece of technology, and that Sony is being very 'by the numbers'.

First, why Microsoft defeated Sony. Microsoft has created a unique piece of technology. Its TV services are one of a kind and highlight an actual transition. Gaming is no longer for children, and upgraded visuals alone won't cut it. Microsoft has introduced something revolutionary that will challenge the likes of Google and Apple. Nintendo introduced motion control and Microsoft and Sony both followed, yet at least Microsoft did something a little different and has stuck with it and improved it.

Sony has been doing the exact same thing for the last 20 years: copying the competition while creating better visuals. Nintendo introduces the Wii Remote and PlayStation copies with Move; Microsoft showcases Xbox Live and PlayStation creates an unworthy competitor. Kinect? Many would say it was a rip-off of the EyeToy, and I would agree. Sony had pretty much abandoned the EyeToy before Xbox brought that type of motion control to family gaming. Then Sony go on to reintroduce the EyeToy with a version that doesn't stand up to Kinect 2.0.

I, for one, will be there on day one for both consoles and I know One will be my primary device. As long as quality games are produced, I'll be happy.

Michael Kondratiuk

This is next gen?

If you consider the number of games on show at E3 alone, it was a vintage year. But so much of what we saw was recycled that the big three's main showings were characterised by a lack of imagination. Even Nintendo, known for its creative spirit, offered only piecemeal additions to its well-worn series.

Sony and Microsoft, meanwhile, offered up a hailstorm of bullets from men and mechs, and *DriveClub* and *Forza 5* highlighted the diminishing returns of modelling realistic cars that you mostly see from a distance and at speed (while cloud-powered opponents sound suspiciously like shifting the blame for bad AI). Even *Project Spark*, a game sold on its potential for unbridled creativity, was demonstrated as a goblin-fighting simulator.

As firstparty lineups go, they proved uninspiring, to say the least. Playing things safe with big-hitters is understandable, sure, but by presenting prettier last-gen experiences predominately as the future of games, Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo have left me feeling their opinion of gamers isn't as high as they'd like you to think it is.

Ollie Maxwell

There were lots of previous-gen ideas wrapped in next-gen clothing at E3, but you're oversimplifying. There's a lot to be excited about, but it's not all easy to show in a trailer. This issue's Hype section has a stab at cutting through to the good stuff.

Expo-sé?

E3 2013 was a hodgepodge of bizarre PR showcasing what people who aren't into videogames think the industry is all about: a flashy showing of violent power fantasies and shiny toys mixed with bad jokes and almost no women. It showed off game after game of being either a guy with a nice car, a guy with a big gun, or a guy on a sports team – all in super-gorgeous high-polycount definition. If anything, it was an E3 of more of the same from those big companies you know the names of, giving presentations directly to so-called gaming journalists.

Now, if you look beyond the surface of that, E3 is still a big celebration of what videogames have to offer the world: unique experiences, cutting-edge technology at a consumer-friendly price, and 'fun'. But I'm starting to wonder if E3 is still relevant to the industry. It's an overblown trade show where, yes, many big announcements are still made, but Nintendo proved that holding your own non-E3 press event could make just as big an impact. Sony and even Microsoft to a point did highlight indie games during their press events, which was nice. But I don't know how many times I saw some footage of *Watch Dogs*. I get it – that's going to be the next big triple-A game. Cool. I don't need to see a trailer of it at nearly every press event. I don't need to hear the words 'evolving online world' or 'super-realistic graphics' or 'polycount' again this year. I want games. I want a variety of games. And, well, the 'big' press events at E3 just didn't give that to me.

I'm sure had I been there, and been on the floor, I would have got it. But as a consumer, as a developer in my off-time from work, I normally would not be invited to such an event. Of course, I look forward to it every year. I get excited about announcements. But those announcements could easily come at a different time. Sony and Microsoft didn't announce new hardware at E3; that was done weeks or months beforehand. But of all the things that help justify stereotypes to the non-gaming world about those of us who are passionate about games, E3 is one of them. Maybe it's time to pull the plug on E3.

Janette Goering

You're right that the primacy of E3 has faded, but we expect it to evolve further next year. And there's no doubt that it would benefit from change, with a greater focus on all of the industry's work, and better representation of the diversity in games today. Enjoy your new Vita.


Michael Kondratiuk praises Microsoft for its innovation, and chides Sony for playing it safe



Nintend'oh!

Maybe it's the desire to thrust a heroes-and-villains (and Nintendo) narrative onto E3 proceedings, but by the time Nintendo's E3 transmission drew to a close, tragedy was on my mind. Of course we'd see a 3D *Mario* and *Smash Bros*, and *Mario Kart*: after a turbulent financial year, conservatism of franchise announcements was inevitable. However, the apparent dearth of invention within the framework of these games was not.

The depressing, prolonged focus on minor individual additions to these series – the Villager in *Smash Bros*, or the cat suit in *Super Mario 3D World* – served only to highlight the contrast between Nintendo's current timidity and its earlier, gleefully generous game design, when it was happy to throw in a delightfully strange item like the Kuribo's Shoe for a single level in *Super Mario Bros 3* before jettisoning it for something new.

Nintendo has, of course, traded off of nostalgia for a while now, but where once its reiterations strengthened its series' magic, increasingly they're serving only to dilute it. The company's apologies – once novel and refreshingly forthright – have become uncomfortably frequent. Humility has come to greatly resemble desperation. The presentation's quiet, well-mannered style was a pleasant alternative to the fatigue-inducing onslaught of cars and guns elsewhere, but it also reinforced the niggling sense of Nintendo's redundancy.
Benjamin Pulo

Platinum's *Bayonetta 2* was the most exciting prospect of a high-nostalgia, low-innovation showing for Wii U at E3. It's a rare and not entirely pleasant occurrence when Nintendo's firstparty games are outshone by thirdparty offerings, which illustrates the odd position in which the company finds itself.

"Nintendo's apologies – once novel – have become uncomfortably frequent"

Positive vibes

I came out of E3 feeling quite positive about the growth and continuation of the game industry. That said, I do wish people could reveal their new forms of hardware without resorting to bashing the competition; it shows a lack of maturity I would hope the industry is starting to move past.

Still, I thought there was a spectacular array of games that showcased what new technologies were capable of, and also the impressive imaginations that are able to bring to life so many potentially immersive worlds. Whether it was console exclusives or multiplatform games, there was definitely something in there for everyone, and as a gamer I can't help but see it as a good thing.

Microsoft clearly had a vision for the Xbox One, and while it may not have been a vision that everyone – or anyone – agreed with, it had a direction that it seemed willing to follow through on. Recent developments show that Microsoft is at least willing to listen to its critics and make changes based on what it seems most consumers want. With the inclusion of the impressive Kinect 2.0 – which demonstrated a remarkable improvement – and what came across as incredible support for multiple media, if you want an entertainment unit then the Xbox One is the way to go.

PS4, on the other hand, seemed to me to be the total console – seemingly made by gamers, for gamers. It answered the rage aimed elsewhere with quirky showcases and humorous jokes. Sony's support for self publishing indie titles can only be seen as a good thing, since it will allow gamers access to a vast library of quality games that otherwise would be denied to them. To me, though, it didn't feel as if it had innovated much with anything, but it was an improvement on the PS3.

Nintendo did what it does best, showing off a list of family-friendly exclusives with behind-the-times cartoony graphics, which will appeal to younger and casual audiences. While I won't be jumping on the Wii U train personally, I appreciate what Nintendo does for gamers and the game industry as a whole.

With all that in mind, E3 was great and had entertainment value. However, everyone failed to mention that it's still the PC that has the cheapest games, is the most versatile, and does everything both consoles do. If only it wasn't for those poxy exclusives.
Luke J ■

ONLINE OFFLINE

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Microsoft's U-turn

I think it is cool to see them not being too proud to reverse some decisions they seemed pretty adamant about.
Very impressive. It does just mean things remain the same though. I did wonder if DRM would have eventually led to an entirely digital gaming platform and, possibly, cheaper downloads. Guess that is out the window now.
David Knowles

If the Internet was around, and loud, when the first Xbox came out and went hard-line broadband only, I bet Xbox Live would've had a dial-up ridden mess of a start, and online console gaming would've been stuck in the stone ages now.
Simon Lundmark

That's a huge turnaround. On the one hand, fair play to MS for doing it. On the other, whatever vision they had for a bigger, better industry will be altered to the current playing field. Have we moved forwards or just pandered to our own desires? When you give the fans everything they want in a Star Wars movie, you get The Phantom Menace; basically we don't know what we really want.
Alastair Macnair

...And nobody wants another Phantom Menace.
Stuart Macnair



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Why you really can't make a videogame of Aliens, or any war film that's more about tension than shooting

Having witnessed the explosion-enhanced culmination of *Halo*'s weirdly touching transhumanist romance, my indefatigable co-op partner and I were casting around for a new world to blow things up in. Aware of the shoddy reviews poor *Aliens: Colonial Marines* had received, we tried it anyway – and it turns out to be a moderately entertaining two-person blast. The only problem, and it is, admittedly, rather a serious one, is that fighting the xenomorphs doesn't actually work. Scuttling jerkily over walls in the distance, they just look like videogame spiders of the sort that twin-pistolled Lara Croft used to dispose of with contemptuous ease. Then when they suddenly materialise right in front of you, they look like not-very-terrifying cardboard cutouts of aliens, the likes of which were perhaps once on display in Woolworths. And then one you didn't see bites you from behind and you end up firing your last-stand pistol impotently at the ceiling, calling apologetically on your comrade to revive you.

The design dilemma here, of course, is that when there are thousands of aliens, they can't be made too dangerous; whereas if they are very powerful but few in number, most of the game will be spent trudging empty corridors. (The corridors in *Colonial Marines* are rather beautiful corridors, but still.) More fundamentally, though, it was always a quixotic notion to turn Aliens into a shooter, because the film is not a shooter. Though we think of it as a war-film sequel to a horror film, Cameron's movie contains relatively little shooting, and what shooting you get is decidedly chaotic and not triumphant. Instead – and as in all classic war movies – there is a lot of extremely tense waiting.

My favourite scene of the whole film (in some extended cut) is the one in which the team set up sentry guns aimed down a long corridor and wait. The aliens come, and the turrets efficiently shoot them to acidy bits. But there are so many aliens, and they just keep coming. The team watch the red-LED ammo counters of the turrets in horror as they slowly count down to zero. The xenomorphs' suicidal assault is a fascinating mixture of the almost tragically heroic – like infantrymen hurling themselves over the tops of the trenches at enemy machine gunners in the First World War – and the horrifically incomprehensible: these vicious space-minds show absolutely no mercy to any organism in the galaxy, including themselves. The suspense of this scene is worthy of Hitchcock. And it would not work in a videogame. The marines have outsourced their agency to automated turrets, and are just watching in mounting fear.

> It was always a quixotic notion to turn Aliens into a shooter, because the film is not a shooter

So it comes as a relief quite early on when *Colonial Marines* suddenly gets embarrassed that it is a game about trying to shoot apparently randomly teleporting cardboard Woolworths cutouts of aliens, and instead decides to be a low-rent *Call Of Duty* in space. This is more like it: shooting bellicose men who are popping up and down behind crates in pretty space corridors. The whole aliens thing was never going to carry a game anyway.

Aliens: Colonial Marines is an unsatisfying videogame version of the film, then, because no satisfying videogame version of the film could actually be made. Its creators are hardly alone in having made such a mistake in the first place. Throughout videogame history, at least since the 1980s, game executives have latched on to a cinematic source inspiration that has guns in it and thought, 'Guns! Videogames have guns in them too! This will make a great videogame!' Notoriously, they very rarely have.

Because the player has continuously to be given something kinetically satisfying to do, a war-based videogame will always have to err on the side of Rambo rather than The Thin Red Line. Those that do it best are those that embrace the Michael Bay-esque absurdity of the conceit in the first place: the *COD*s, the *Halo*s and the *Gears*. Or they outdo even pulp cinema in their baroque military fantasy, perhaps casting the player as a sword-wielding special-ops cyborg ninja doing relentlessly bladetastic battle with bad men and mooing robots. Yes, it's one of my favourite games so far this year, *Metal Gear Rising*.

The sheer silly joy of *Rising* arises from another generic twist, cousin to the one James Cameron played on Ridley Scott's original movie: *Rising* is a wargame that is really a beat 'em up. And once you get the hang of slicing people and bovine mechs apart at elegant angles, it's even more fun than shooting usually is. Yet in other ways it's curiously relevant to the practice of war in our time. Early on, one of the characters refers to "private military companies", prompting a member of one such outfit to protest: "We prefer private security provider, sir." "Yes, well," the first man replies, "security can mean many things." That's a sharper comment on modern political rhetoric than any you'll find in a supposedly more realistic combat entertainment set in real-world sandy places. Why shoot jerky xenomorphs when you can dice enormous anthropomorphic machines to pieces and get a witty lesson in Unspeak at the same time?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Games, like the web, were once insular. But why do we resist diversity now we're mainstream?

Sometimes I pine after the early days of the Internet, when it was sparse and secret. At some hulking beast of a machine, discordant, jangling modem noise would welcome your entrance to an alternate universe of text trees and mysterious screen names, a place of webrings and crude, blinking 'under construction' signposts. It felt like counterculture – it was private, a society with its own vocabulary.

A certain pride and pleasure came with Internet literacy in the early days. Other people were bound to the routines of their visible lives, but you knew people on the other side of the world and referred to them by mysterious handles. You could fearlessly strip and dissect a machine, fingering dust from fan blades, slotting this wire into that one. Not because you were particularly adept with hardware, but because you taught yourself to do anything – anything – you had to do to make the system work so you could go online.

It wasn't sophisticated. Ease of use was not a thing. But what mattered was online was a place to go, a place only for those who knew its landscape and its passphrases. These days, of course, the Internet isn't a world, but an omnipresent part of the world that's accessible to everyone. I've been weeks without a proper phone number and not missed it much, because my friends are on Facebook, my family emails, my work is on websites, and I get links to news, ideas and information through the constant social media stream.

None of us could really live without it, and it's good, but there was a certain something special and holy in the old days of our secret society that I sometimes long for. You could disappear into Internet culture and be someone else, and have experiences that were not possible in the physical world.

That's the case with games, too. So many of them came to us crude and clumsy and asked us to take them at face value, and we did because we had no choice. They required persistence and stubbornness – cartridges grew love-worn over years as we wrung out every last secret. To play them, you and your friends stole away into tiny school labs, friends' basements, and pulled clusters of chairs up around boxy screens.

> Do developers protecting 'the old ways' realise that insularity is no longer protecting them?

There was a beauty and privacy to this time that a lot of people who have grown up with games miss. Without the Internet, without the mainstreaming of interactive entertainment, finding your people out there in the world was a quest in its own right. The kid on the school bus reading over a Dungeons & Dragons campaign might be one of yours. The girl with the Nintendo notebook might be one of yours. Maybe the lonesome-looking classmate with the great big glasses would like to come over and play adventure games with you.

Game culture became more than a celebration of games; it was a private language that united outcasts and protected the escapists, the downtrodden, and those with wishes and ideas that were hard to manifest in the reality we'd been given. These days, I'm often critical of the insularity of 'gamer culture' – the role of games in the world has grown large now, and as adults acquainted with the potential of the medium, it's time to evolve and become welcoming. That you grew up with creative technology no longer makes you a victim; instead it makes you powerful.

Still, the urge to protect a secret language is understandable. Which is why it's so odd that today's gamers – many of whom are also game creators – focus their most passionate protective efforts not on games any longer, but on brands and franchises. Alongside the Wild West of independent creation blossoming across new and open platforms, why do forums, fandoms and, more importantly, professional development cultures continue to prize companies and franchises that lead the march on the mainstreaming and dilution of their beloved medium?

Why will self-identified proud gamers disqualify a mysterious Twine game found in a quiet corner of the web, but leap up to reject all criticism of Microsoft's newest home television console initiative? Do developers desperate to protect 'the old ways' realise their insularity is no longer protecting them, but speeding their journey to broad baseline consumption?

So much of the resistance to diversity initiatives and experimental game creation comes from the idea that games are sacred, and that they must not change. The shelter of old must remain intact at all costs. But if to you game creation is a beloved archival language, why not look to the unfamiliar, the mysterious? The new and unheard-of designers, personal games, and all the other vast corners of our medium that still need to be loved in secret, mapped and charted? Those are your people. Remember?

While Microsoft talks about sports and war, seek out the great sages of the browser, the uncanny geniuses still building ASCII worlds. To defend your secret language, to protect your downtrodden, turn to the creators that need your protection. Gaming franchises on retail shelves don't need you to be their cultural warrior. You can still escape into the universes nobody else sees.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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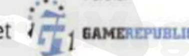
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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

An unexpected new look for Sony's studios chief is just one of many changes facing PSN developers

Something is wrong with Shuhei Yoshida, president of SCE Worldwide Studios. All the rumpled indie developers on Sony's Boeing 777, which has been idling for hours on a Dubai runway, notice as soon as he finally emerges from his private cabin. Beneath his usual fawn blazer he wears a new-looking M83 tee instead of his standard Oxford shirt. His elegant silver glasses have been replaced by chunky hipster frames. His sensible haircut is bizarrely pomaded upwards at the back, and a wallet chain swings from the belt loop of what are clearly women's jeans. A faded nightclub stamp is visible on the back of his hand.

The game designers are on the plane as part of Sony's new initiative to entice indie developers away from Steam and Ouya. One-hundred-and-fifty devs were invited to spend seven days on a junket with Yoshida, stopping at Hard Rock Cafes in seven different countries for reasons that remain entirely unclear. But what indie developer could pass up a week of global wining and dining on Sony's tab while getting an inside track on the latest indie-friendly initiatives? Remembering their good fortune, the passengers shake off their shock at Yoshida's appearance and start a tentative round of applause. This is cut short when Yoshida suddenly darts down the aisle shouting "YOLO!", wantonly pouring cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon around as the developers frantically scrabble for their plastic cups.

Back at the head of the aisle, Yoshida turns to face the baffled developers. He's now radiating his usual refreshing candour and good humour. After some warm, polished introductory remarks, he segues into his prepared spiel for the gathered developers, who are picking suspiciously at the vegan meals they've just been served. Yoshida turns on a laptop projector and pulls up a slideshow. The first slide looks like the wiring diagram for an immensely complicated machine. But the developers, knowing better, groan in recognition – it's a flow chart depicting Sony's developer submissions process, with its 666 labyrinthine steps. Many of them are arbitrary, some seem deliberately cruel, and more than a few are potentially fatal.

Pausing dramatically, Yoshida draws an organic Natural American Spirit cigarette from inside his jacket and casually sticks it in the corner of his mouth, but backwards. Lighting the filter and inhaling deeply, he coughs violently, turning red. Still, he manages two more determined drags. The developers look on in horror as the stench of burnt cellulose fills the plane. Once Yoshida's coughing fit passes, he chokes out a sigh of relief and presses on. Until recently, he admits, indie developers who wanted to get their games on PSN or Vita had to jump through all sorts of hoops, including relinquishing creative control, washing Yoshida's Lotus 2-Eleven Roadster and maybe even drinking noxious cocktails of condiments ("because it's funny," according to company policy). A wrong move in the submissions process could even land a developer in gruesome experiments with the PlayStation Move and tank controls.

Yoshida says that he randomly ran into a certain hot young developer – who spent five years making a celebrated indie game where you stare at a motionless glowing orb as a metaphor for time or love or something – at a "musical concert by the American five-piece indie rock group Deerhunter, who have described themselves as ambient punk, though they incorporate a wide range of genres". He makes no attempt to hide the fact that he's reading from a Wikipedia printout. At the back of the plane, an embarrassed-looking young man self-consciously crosses his arms over the Deerhunter logo on his shirt. According to Yoshida, the developer had confided that the main reason he wouldn't make games for Sony was that he didn't want to die. The president pauses significantly, rubbing his neck and smearing the tribal tattoo that's plainly been drawn on in Sharpie. "Our submissions process was literally killing game designers," he says reflectively. "That got to me." Then he pulls up the next slide, which elicits a chorus of gasps.

Sony contracts need no longer be signed in babies' blood; the blood of any mammal will do

Titled Sony's New Indie Submissions Process, the slide displays a giant smiley emoticon ringed with talking points such as 'One Step!' and 'Non-Lethal!' alongside more obscure items such as 'No Baby Blood!' and 'Seapunk!'. Yoshida explains that as of now indie developers who want to release games with Sony simply have to "come chill at my house and listen to phonograph records of dubstep music". If Yoshida likes your haircut, Sony will take care of the rest. In addition, he says, Sony will no longer charge exorbitant sums for dev kits, patches, basic logons, and the privilege of not wearing a proprietary electro-convulsive monitory collar. Instead, developers will receive the basic tools they need for free and pursue their visions without fear of corporate meddling or reprisal by way of a remotely triggered incapacitating shock. Finally, Yoshida says, Sony contracts need no longer be signed in babies' blood; the blood of any mammal will do. The president disappears into his cabin, not to be seen again for the rest of the junket, as the indie developers open their veins.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

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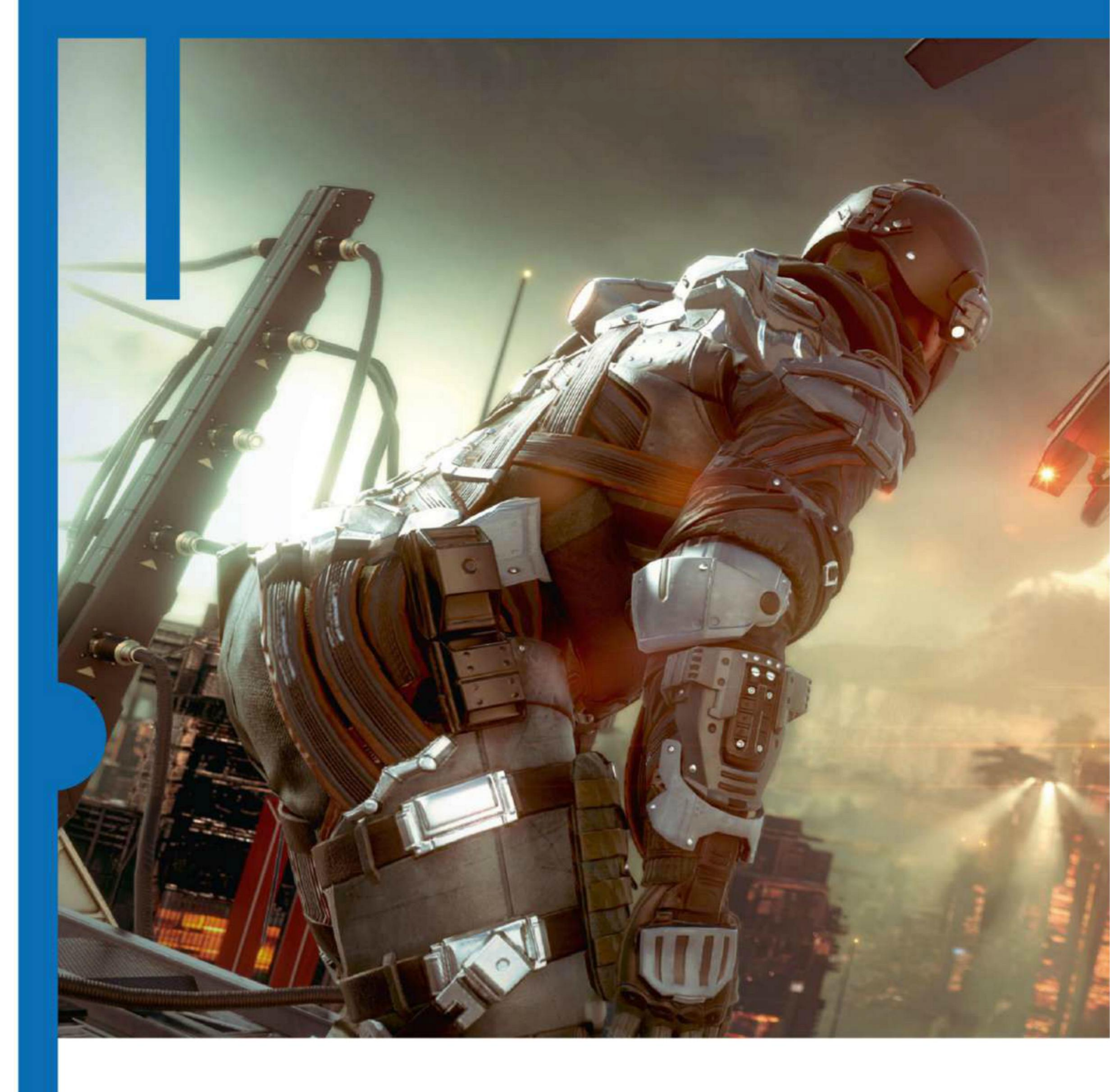
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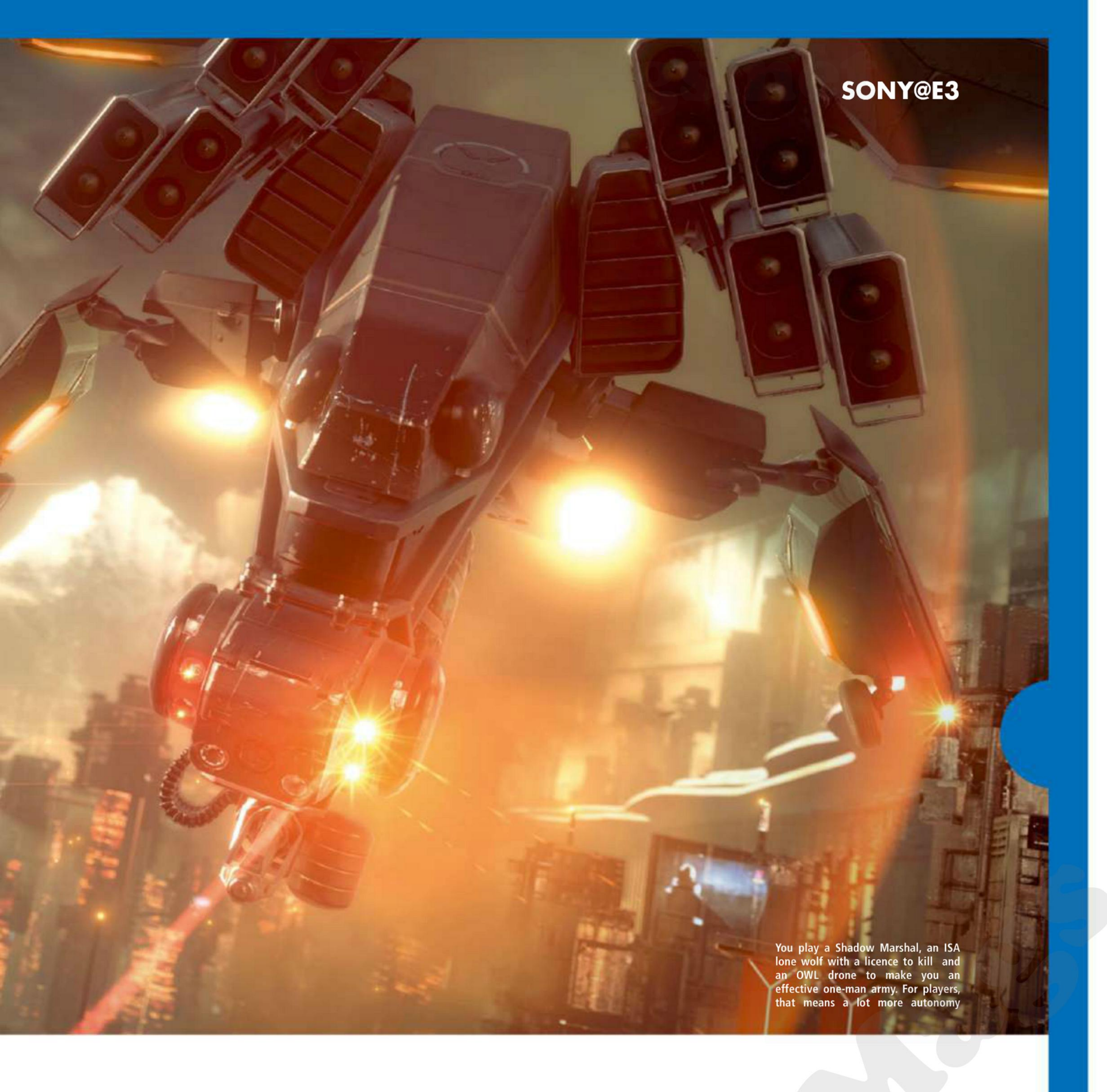


KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL

Publisher SCE **Developer** Guerilla Games **Format** PS4 **Release** Q4

For its first sortie into the next generation, it's heartening to see Guerrilla Games is widening its gameplay ambitions alongside its graphical ones. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* marks a refresh in approach for this series, taking its distinctive sense of weighty movement and transplanting it into a bigger, more open game that invites player choice. The feel is still recognisably *Killzone*, with impactful gunplay, devastatingly violent melee moves, and an emphasis on light and particle effects to make the most of PS4's architectural strengths. But *Shadow Fall*'s large-scale levels are a far cry from the claustrophobic gauntlets of *Killzone*s past, giving you much greater freedom in your approach to wiping out the Helghast.

Levels aren't just bigger, but more varied. Our hands-on demo, for instance, has us investigating a downed ISA ship at a crash site within a vast green forest. A pillar of smoke indicates our destination, yet there



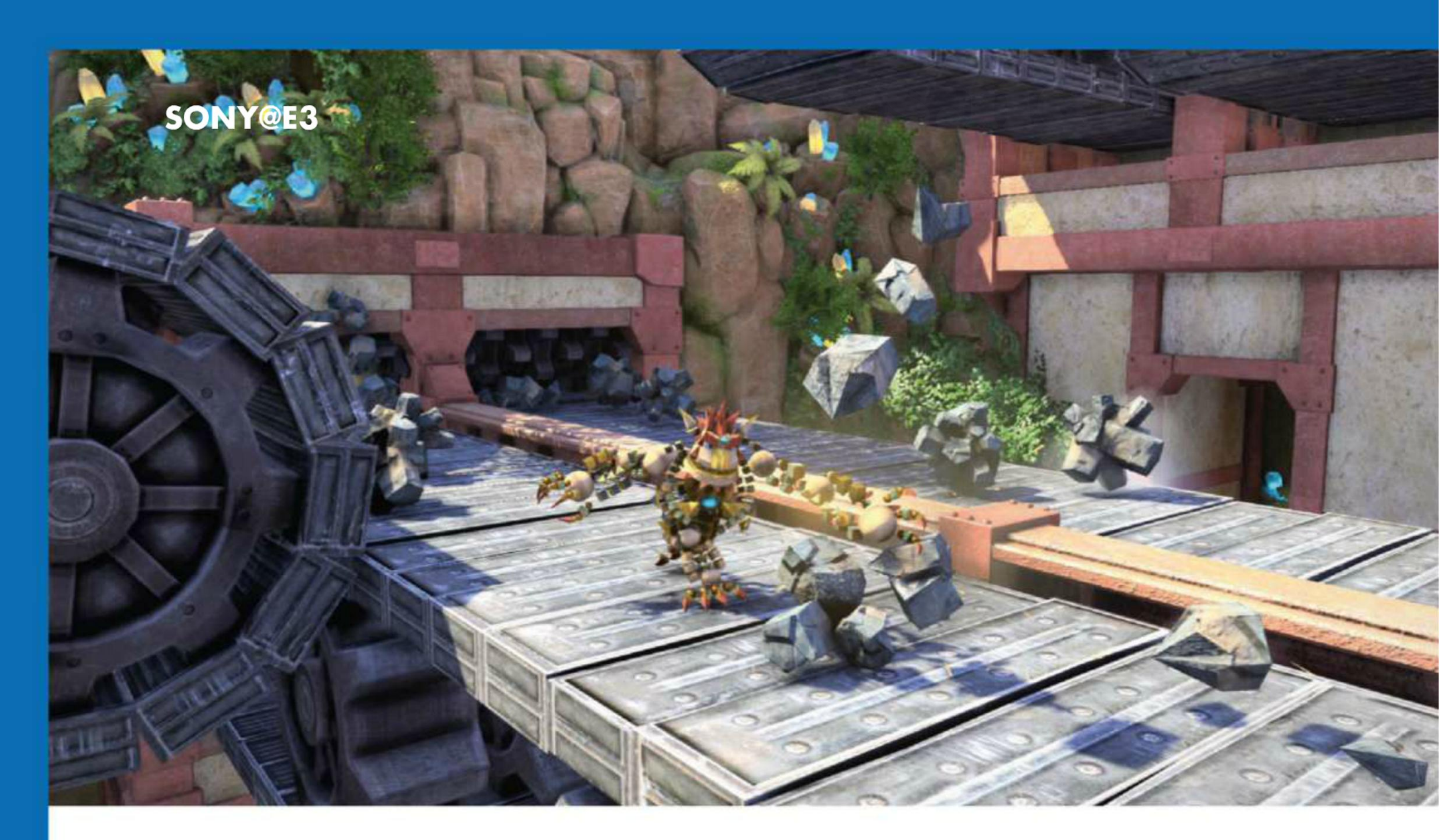
You play a Shadow Marshal, an ISA lone wolf with a licence to kill and an OWL drone to make you an effective one-man army. For players, that means a lot more autonomy

are avenues to explore in other directions, including a bunker to the north that can be ransacked for supplies and a secondary objective to the east. All three points of interest can be tackled in any order, and the secondary objectives ignored entirely if you wish.

Movement between the canopy above and the grassy floor below is aided by your OWL drone, a futuristic flying toolset. It has four modes, which can be switched between either by using a radial menu or by swiping the DualShock 4's touchpad. One fires out ziplines that allow you to traverse gaps or descend on foes from on high. This isn't merely a matter of zooming between predetermined points, but a chance to consider tactical space: you can place a zipline anywhere you like, even if doing so means putting yourself at a disadvantage.

The rest of its functions focus on combat. You can command it to head out on a scouting mission with machine gun at the ready, perform a shock attack that stuns any hostiles within range, or deploy its one-way shield and fire on enemies with impunity for a short while. Completing the package is an array of contextual support functions, such as disabling enemy alarms to reduce incoming Helghast support.

To help you plan these more freeform engagements, tapping up on the D-pad sends out an echo pulse, enabling you to see concealed guards as wireframe outlines. None of these new abilities are revolutionary for gaming as a whole, but they represent Guerrilla shaking off the habits of a decade to appease an audience that is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with rote corridor shooters.



KNACK

Publisher SCE **Developer** In-house (Japan Studio) **Format** PS4 **Release** Q4

Mark Cerny may have played a critical role in PS4's development architecture, but he's got a significant part to play in the console's launch slate, too. *Knack*, a family-friendly action adventure developed by Japan Studio and overseen by Cerny, stands out from the racers, shooters and sports games that make up the bulk of PS4's day-one lineup.

Players control the titular Knack, who grows by absorbing objects around him. This made for an eye-catching demo at the PS4 launch event in February, showing off the system's capable handling of particle effects and inviting comparisons with *Katamari Damacy*. The game itself, however, plays out more like the *Lego* series. Travellers Tales' core loop of smashing things and picking up the bits is given greater consequence here: instead of a rising counter, your avatar grows as you progress. Where *Katamari*'s biggest delights came when your building-sized globe gobbled up the people and cars that had threatened you minutes earlier, here enemies scale with your growth. So at the outset you're taking on goblins on foot, and by the end you're storeys high and flinging cars at goblins in helicopters.

There are ideas aplenty in this four-part demo, though few are satisfactorily explored. After punching and dodging our way through an outdoor section, occasionally air-dashing over proximity mines and then taking out a goblin mech, we're transported indoors for some stealth. With a button press, Knack casts off his collected mass, his tiny translucent form walking under a web of lasers or through a network of vents. Another button press and we're back to full size. There's no puzzle element here, or real challenge: it's always a little too obvious what you're supposed to do. When the action shifts to a frozen cavern, Knack can smash stalagmites and turn the icy shards into another health bar's worth of armour, but apart from the '90s-style slippy-slidey ground under his feet, it's business as usual.

Japan Studio is aiming for a CG movie quality with its visuals, and Knack has sheen to spare

Japan Studio is aiming for a CG movie quality with its visuals, and *Knack* has sheen to spare. It presents an endorsement for PS4's talent when it comes to dazzling particle effects too, particularly during Knack's special moves. In one, his component parts swirl around him and damage any nearby enemies; another sees him slam into the ground, the resulting AOE particle shower insta-killing anything within range. But the pace is sluggish – the 30fps refresh rate wouldn't be so bad if Knack moved with a little more grace, but he's a slow mover irrespective of size. Cerny's game may fill a hole in the launch lineup, but on this evidence it's his role in the system, not its software, that's had more success.



INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

Publisher SCE **Developer** Sucker Punch **Format** PS4 **Release** Q1 2014

Cole McGrath, perhaps the blandest hero of this generation, is gone. One of *Infamous 2*'s two endings meant he met an untimely end; Sucker Punch, drawing from Trophy data suggesting this was the climax most players saw, has taken it as canon. McGrath's death triggered an event that saw his powers spread across the populace, and *Second Son* is set seven years later when the government has created the Department of Unified Protection, or DUP, to control America's new heroes – or, as the DUP has it, bioterrorists.

The debut trailer suggested new protagonist Delsin Rowe was just McGrath with smoke powers instead of electric ones; in fact, Rowe can copy the abilities of those around him, like a skate punk Shang Tsung. This creates many new mechanical possibilities, both for traversal (Rowe turns to smoke, shoots into a ground-level air vent and emerges from another on the roof; once airborne, he can zip forward with successive air-dashes) and combat (a fiery chain up close, bursts of kinetic energy from range, and a ground pound from the air). There's no word on how new powers are introduced, though we suspect boss fights will play a role. We hope the earlier games' binary morality system is gone, but McGrath's legacy is secure: Rowe has at least inherited his awkward jumping animation.



THE ORDER: 1886

Publisher SCE **Developer** Ready At Dawn
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter. Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters. There's been a concerted push from Hollywood to reanimate familiar narratives by grafting on incongruous horror elements or making the existing ones even more eyebrow-raising. Based on its in-engine reveal trailer, *The Order: 1886* appears to be games' lunge in the same direction. Four respectably attired soldiers clatter across the cobbles of a steampunk London in a stagecoach, pawing at the weapons cradled in their laps. So far, so tasteful – provocative even. Things go astray when their driver gets eaten by a monster and they all leap out and start firing miniguns, pistols, rocket launchers and shotguns. What looked at first like it had a whiff of seriousness about it quickly unravels into absurdity. You can almost imagine the 'Sherlock and load!' marketing strapline.



OUTLAST

Publisher Red Barrels **Developer** In-house
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

Survival horror is quite the departure for a team comprised of former Ubisoft and Naughty Dog staff with credits on *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, *Assassin's Creed* and the first *Uncharted*. *Outlast* owes a debt to the likes of *Amnesia*, dropping players outside an insane asylum populated by terrifying mutated brutes with no means to fight them off. All you have is a video camera with a night-vision mode, powered by batteries that are the game's most vital resource. *Outlast*'s playable debut appeared at PAX East in tiny curtained booths away from the lights of the show floor. One player took the concept of a jump scare a little too literally and crashed through the booth's makeshift wall. While *Outlast* owes an obvious debt to its genre high points, the video camera's grainy screen provides a fresh twist on a familiar formula.



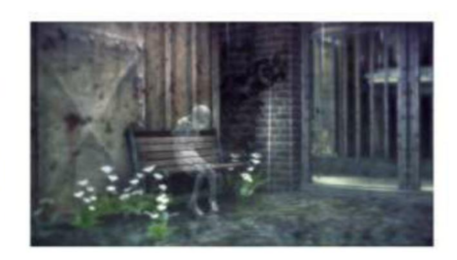
GRAN TURISMO 6

Publisher SCE **Developer** In-house (Polyphony Digital)
Format PS3 **Release** Q4

Petrolheads have long suspected that the balance of power has been shifting from Polyphony to Turn 10, and the 'real driving simulator' studio's decision to release the sixth main entry in the *Gran Turismo* series on PS3 could be seen as a gracious retreat in order to let Evolution take up the next-gen PlayStation baton with *DriveClub*. But anyone betting against Yamauchi and co might want to reconsider their position after *GT6*'s E3 showing. Despite the platform, this looks every bit a next-gen game, with Polyphony squeezing astonishing visuals from PS3. And while *GT*'s almost militaristic attention to detail has its detractors, getting back behind the wheel is a reminder that the series has heart, too. With 1,200 cars (including a debut for open-wheeled racing) and a new track editor, *Gran Turismo* isn't running out of horsepower yet.







1001 SPIKES

Publisher Nicalis **Developer** In-house
Format PS Vita **Release** TBA

When your fedora-sporting explorer dies in *1001 Spikes*, the message (or is it a taunt?) 'You Are Dead!' flashes onscreen in what feels like homage to FromSoftware. The *Dark Souls* and *Spelunky* nods aren't just presentational – *1001 Spikes*' creators have managed to mash a couple of their defining attributes together. The objective is simple: find the key, grab it and get to the exit. But when a game gives you a cache of 1001 lives without even making you enter a cheat code, it's safe to assume you'll be dying a lot. Spikes come thrusting out of blocks in the floor, ceilings routinely collapse, statues belch flame, and at times it seems like the micro-levels have more pit than floor. Vita is the perfect platform for a trial-and-error game, but consider yourself warned: beating just one level could well swallow your entire commute.

GALAK-Z: THE DIMENSIONAL

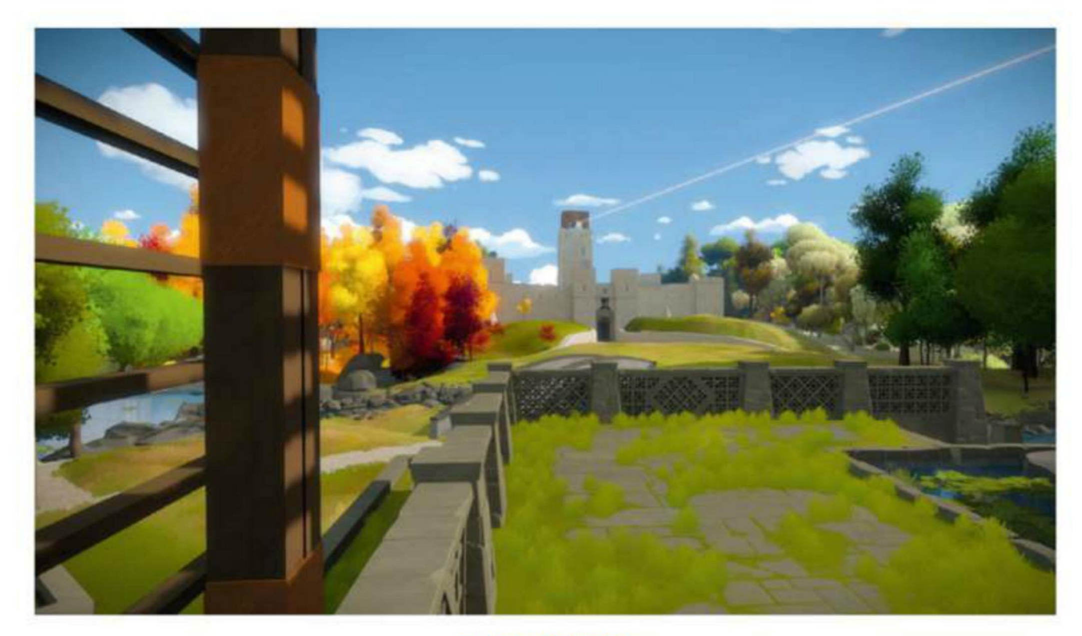
Publisher SCE **Developer** 17-Bit
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

After trying its hand at turn-based strategy for Microsoft with *Skulls Of The Shogun*, Jake Kazdal's studio, 17-Bit, is taking on another classic genre for Sony and PS4. This bullet-hell shooter is no throwback, though, marrying genre conventions to the mechanics of the modern big-budget game. Your opponents aren't just bullet fodder but have proper AI routines, and Kazdal cites *Far Cry 3*'s enemy intelligence as an inspiration. *Galak-Z*'s foes prize their safety over your destruction, calling for backup then working together to wear down your defences. Advanced physics, meanwhile, mean you're more likely to shunt an asteroid to the side than smash into it and die. Set in an open world with a Metroidvania structure, *Galak-Z* puts a dynamic, tactical spin on a genre that's historically been a test of memory and reaction times.

RAIN

Publisher SCE **Developer** In-house (Japan Studio)
Format PS3 **Release** Q3

With its picture-book presentation, painterly visuals and gentle piano soundtrack, it's hard to believe *Rain* is from the same minds as *Tokyo Jungle* – until you play it. Like Japan Studio's animal kingdom roguelike, this is a game of stealthy survival as you guide an invisible boy through a rain-slick city in search of a ghostly girl. Stand in the falling rain and you become visible to the dog-like beasts that roam the city; they're fast, but not bright, and will return to their posts if you can reach dry land. *Tokyo Jungle*'s tall grasses become *Rain*'s awnings, overhangs and archways – a cover mechanic in the truest sense of the words. Splashing through puddles draws foes' attention; we lure one out from a narrow passageway, and make another charge through a door. With no attacks or action button, your enemy becomes your greatest tool.



THE WITNESS

Publisher SCE **Developer** Number None, Inc **Format** PS4 (PC, iOS to follow) **Release** 2013

Never let Jonathan Blow spend 45 minutes demonstrating *The Witness* to you. You'll have seen too much – it's best experienced in total ignorance and seclusion. There's only one tutorial element (a blinking 'X' when you approach your first locked door), which encourages exploration like few other games at this year's E3. Certainly you'll be curious, but by Blow's own admission he's spoiling the game for you with every element he explains.

Like *Braid*, Blow's second game is about teaching the world's rules one step at a time. By gradually adding elements to each simple maze puzzle, *The Witness* reveals how it works. Puzzle one is a single line with a start and end point, puzzle three will add an extra route to that end point, and puzzle 15 might add some checkpoints. By puzzle 50, you'll have to observe the environment for clues; reach 100 and you'll have to apply dozens of rules. The puzzles can be tackled as they're discovered on the *The Witness*' open-world island, and the game is gated not by hidden keys but by knowledge – only by understanding earlier puzzles can you solve the later ones.

But we've said too much. *The Witness* is PS4's flagship indie game because it resembles a big-budget game, but does what no major studio would dare to: trusts you to be smart.



DRIVECLUB

Publisher SCE **Developer** Evolution Studios **Format** PS4 **Release** Q4

Pity Evolution, which has elected to bring its new realistic racer to a platform destined to receive a *Gran Turismo* sequel somewhere down the line. At launch, *DriveClub* has been spared that competition, and both Sony and Evolution are giving it every opportunity to succeed. It's only a *GT* competitor in screenshots, for starters; hands on, *DriveClub*'s handling has more in common with *Grid* or *Project Gotham* – a mix of arcade and simulation. It's more progressive online, and is built around the kinds of user-generated challenges Polyphony would never consider. And, critically, every PlayStation Plus subscriber will receive a cut-down version of the game with a limited selection of cars and tracks.

This is Sony building a foundation for its new franchise using the old *Gran Turismo Concept* and *Prologue* editions as a model, putting *DriveClub* into the hands of players who'd otherwise be happy playing *GT6* on PS3. Distribution aside, we're not quite sure how *DriveClub* intends on finding the inside track, though. There's precious little room in the crowded racer market for something new, especially with *The Crew*, *Forza 5* and *Need For Speed: Rivals* all gunning for similarly connected featuresets. E3 is not the place to see the game's social networking systems and on-the-fly challenges at their best, though, so perhaps comparison is best saved for actual race conditions.



BEYOND: TWO SOULS

Publisher SCE **Developer** Quantic Dream
Format PS3 **Release** October 8

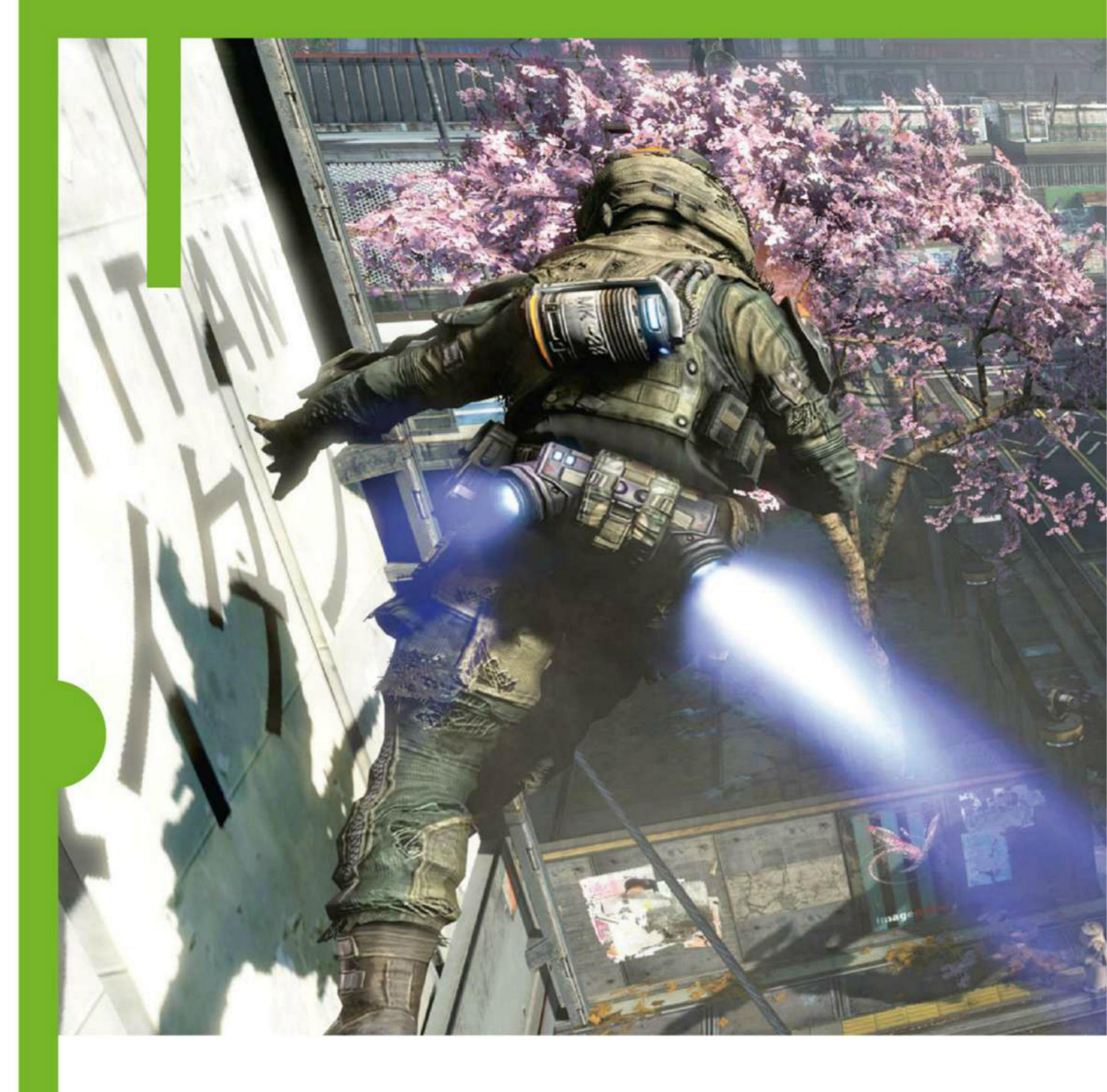
For all David Cage's talk of taking games to a higher plane, our most pressing concerns about his studio's work are mechanical in nature. A first glance at *Beyond: Two Souls* in motion hardly inspires confidence, our demo full of glowing button prompts and *Dragon's Lair* scripting. While the trailer shown during Sony's conference suggested a shift in tone from the early footage – with Jodie Holmes undergoing CIA training before being dropped into a Somali warzone – her ghostly companion, Aiden, remains and brings with him the biggest mechanical deviations from *Heavy Rain*. Tap Triangle and you switch from Jodie to Aiden, floating around the battlefield and choking or possessing enemies. Close combat, meanwhile, involves dodging incoming blows with flicks of an analogue stick in response not to QTE prompts, but the action itself.



PUPPETEER

Publisher SCE **Developer** In-house (Japan Studio)
Format PS3 **Release** September 11

A 2D platformer with handicraft 3D models and backdrops, this dark fairytale invites comparisons with *LittleBigPlanet*. Those put off by *LBP*'s floaty platforming, however, will be glad to hear that one member of the *Puppeteer* team spent an entire year working on the jump mechanic. The result is a pacy platformer that makes great mechanical use of its narrative conceit: a boy turned into a headless puppet and dropped into a theatre. Kutaro can pick up the craniums he finds, and there are 100 in all, each bestowing different powers. The Pirate's head lets you pull enemies towards you or rip paths in the scenery; the Wrestler's gives you a ground pound. Take a hit and you lose your head, scurrying after it with a spring poking from your neck. With this and *Rain*, Japan Studio is ensuring PS3's continued relevance despite its looming successor.



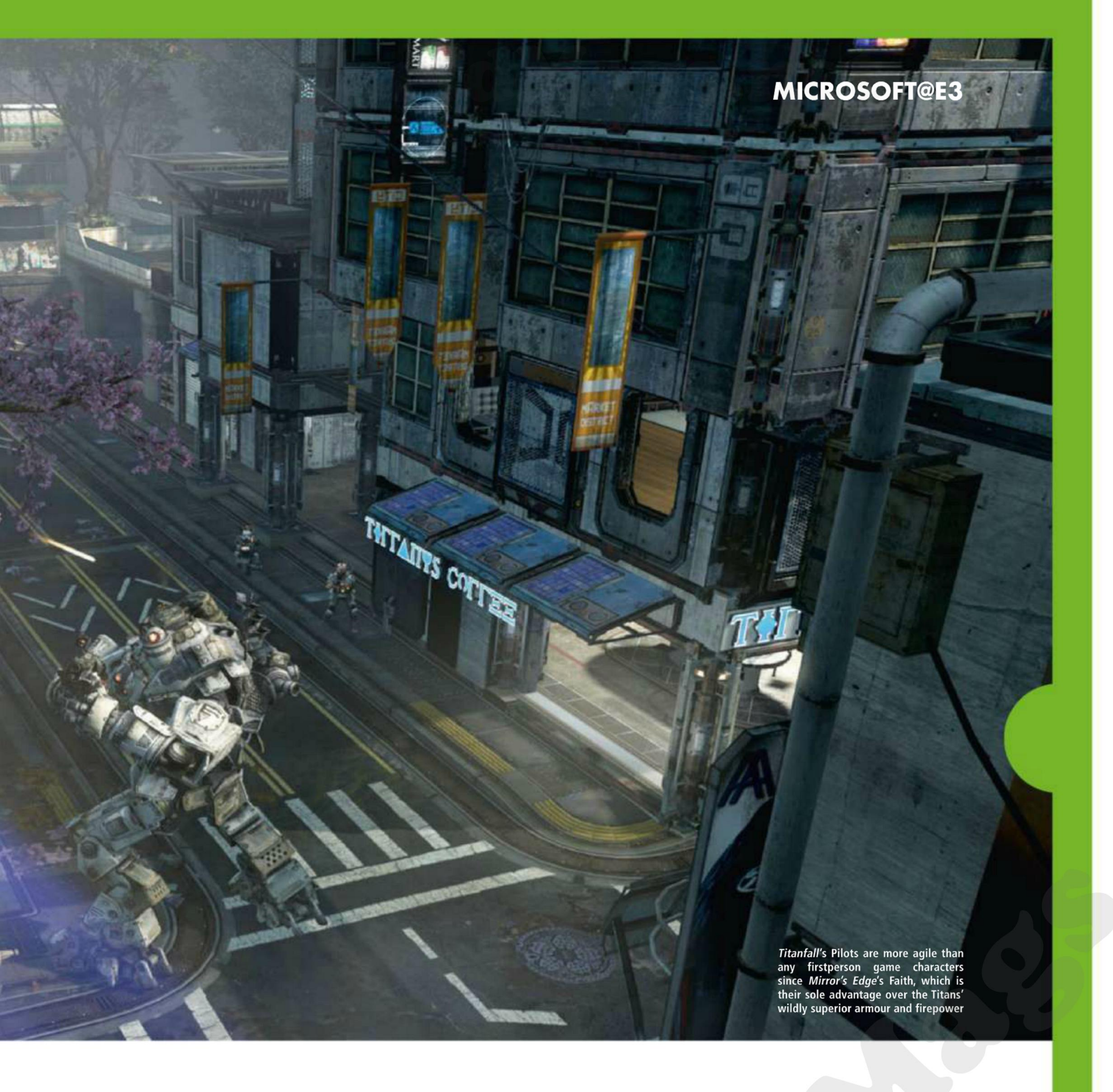
TITANFALL

Publisher EA **Developer** Respawn Entertainment **Format** 360, PC, Xbox One **Release** Q1 2014

Titanfall is a comfortably brown military FPS backed by Microsoft, but it's still a risk for Respawn. Not because gamers are due to give up on fetishising guns this gen, but in a world where every multiplayer shooter has an arbitrary campaign for the express purpose of cutting trailers and adding perceived value, *Titanfall* has none.

"In our game, multiplayer is the campaign," says lead designer **Mackey McCandlish**. "Every level has a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. You play as a Pilot – they're soldiers with extra manoeuvrability – but the battlefield is also populated with AI grunts to fill out the scene, and talk, and bring *Titanfall* that grounded reality that AI characters have been bringing to singleplayer for a long time."

Titanfall is the latest product of the sci-fi revival. As McCandlish points out, Saving Private Ryan kickstarted the early 2000s' WWII obsession and Black Hawk Down helped spawn the modern military



Titanfall's Pilots are more agile than any firstperson game characters since *Mirror's Edge*'s Faith, which is their sole advantage over the Titans' wildly superior armour and firepower

shooter, but *Titanfall* will thrive off the back of Prometheus and District 9 with its galaxy-spanning tale of mech (the titular Titans) war.

As players join the servers, they populate massive dropships. After a brief recruitment phase, these warp over the battlefield and disgorge Pilots from above. "Our game is still infantry-based; we're not building colossal maps for tanks, but we have to build for big infantry and small infantry, and then we have to build so that the small infantry have useful spaces to get an advantage over the Titans. Every map is small enough to be lovingly hand-crafted [and] to take advantage of this scale disparity you get between the cat and mouse, the Titans and Pilots."

And *Titanfall*'s Pilots are agile mice: they can scale buildings in seconds and walljump to mount Titans, tearing away their armoured housing and opening fire on the internal components. In a straight fight, a Pilot on foot is no match for a Titan, but Titans will quickly learn to be wary of elevated vantage points from which Pilots can board and crush the mechs. Far better, then, to pilot your Titan with a friend riding shotgun. Players can hitch a ride on passing friendly mechs as they wait for their own suits to fall into battle, and provide covering fire.

Respawn's E3 demo is a showcase of moments you wouldn't see in a current shooter, but it's the studio's history that makes *Titanfall* such a draw for Xbox One. Made up of members from 2015 Inc and Infinity Ward, this is the same team that under two different names has defined two generations of console gaming. If its trendsetting nature continues, it will kill the bolt-on singleplayer campaign as it defines this one.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 5

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Turn 10 **Format** Xbox One **Release** November

Just as *Project Gotham Racing 3* was the racer used to launch 360, *Forza 5* is the one destined to launch Xbox One, bringing with it the baggage *Gotham* carried in November 2005. It's a game turned around for the next generation in two years and a spectacular feat – every car modelled inside and out, with every door, bonnet and boot ready to be opened and explored. But it's a launch-window racer and there are features conspicuous by their absence.

Night racing was a fundamental in Playground Games' *Forza Horizon*, but plays no part in *Forza 5*, while rain and snow – last seen in *Project Gotham 4* – sit at the top of a list of features the *Forza* community has been demanding for an entire generation. But in spite of those disappointments, community remains at the heart of *Forza 5*, perhaps now more than ever.

This is still *Forza*, but with that excellent handling model augmented by all-new tyre physics compiled in collaboration with crash-test analyst and rubber specialist Calspan, plus total car customisation and community-driven trading. But in *Forza 5* dedicated multiplayer servers and cloud-based systems power everything from the shop front to driver AI. *Forza 5* studies and models the particulars of your own racing style, including all those chicanes you take too wide and those overtakes where you always scrape paint. When you go offline, your laughably named 'Drivatar' keeps racing for you, invading other players' games and racking up wins, which convert to in-game currency when you next log in. Every AI racer in *Forza 5* is another player matched to a skill level of your choosing. It's an instance where Turn 10 overrules its community to great effect; nobody ever asked for Drivatars, but isn't the game more interesting with them?

When you go offline, your laughably named 'Drivatar' keeps racing for you, racking up wins

Perhaps that's little solace to players who hoped for changing weather conditions, especially when *Forza*'s most promising competitor, *Project Cars*, has weather and daylight of every possible flavour and combination. But *Cars* has to match *Forza*'s handling, track design and car roster, which includes open-wheel cars for the first time. Already the game includes 1976 McLaren and Ferrari F1 racers, with Indy cars soon to be revealed, but Turn 10 would still do well to break the habit of a decade and listen to the players who have been clamouring for Ariel's Atom since *Forza 1*.

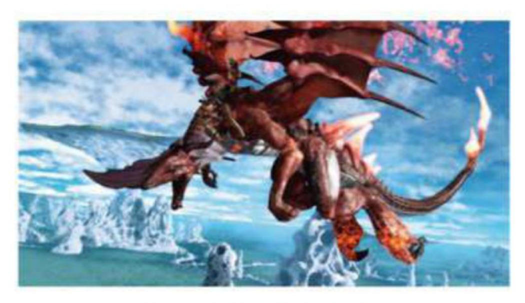
Forza 5 is a first-wave Xbox One title, where the focus has been on making it look the part. With that mission accomplished, *Forza* will get its chance to evolve later. For now, it's an incremental upgrade – a turbocharger and new paint job on perhaps the best racer of the outgoing generation.



SUNSET OVERDRIVE

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Insomniac
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

Sunset Overdrive's debut trailer was colourful, characterful and explosive – everything Insomniac's E3 2011 trailer for *Overstrike* was. That game went on to become the disappointing *Fuse*, casting a slight pall over *Sunset Overdrive*. But Xbox One exclusivity and *Fuse*'s underwhelming sales may give the studio the courage to stand by a brighter art style. It's an aesthetic that works well with the game's playful nature, which focuses on parkour-style 'agile combat' as you use over-the-top weapons to tackle mutant foes. While Insomniac isn't yet ready to let us play the game, it promises an open-world shooter where the experience can change every day, with the studio reacting to pop culture via regular updates. Players will also be able to influence the world, though exactly how isn't clear. However it works, you'll be doing it alongside friends.



CRIMSON DRAGON

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Grounding Inc
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

What started as an XBLA Kinect-based spiritual successor to *Panzer Dragoon* is now an Xbox One title with traditional controls. *Crimson Dragon* is resolutely on rails, the left stick making minor adjustments to avoid enemy fire, the right one to aim, and bumpers for barrel rolls. Kinect support remains, and will be revealed closer to launch, along with details of the multiplayer mode. The first official sighting of Yukio Futatsugi's game didn't quite go to plan: it was a casualty of the Microsoft conference's audio problems, prompting some audience members to add sound effects of their own. There may not have been sound, but there was colour in abundance: bright blue skies, burnt orange sunsets and ordnance in all the colours of the rainbow. It was an uncommonly Japanese presence in a briefing aimed squarely at the west.



DEAD RISING 3

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Capcom Vancouver **Format** Xbox One **Release** November

While the name may evoke fond memories of 360's early days, *Dead Rising 3* has little in common with Keiji Inafune's camp contribution to the zombie oeuvre. Gone are the tight deadlines and sharp map design that made for a game about time, crowd control and route management in equal measure, and also absent is the esoteric save system. Instead we have autosaves, an open world, off-putting claims from developer Capcom Vancouver about targeting the *Call Of Duty* market, and SmartGlass-controlled airstrikes. Microsoft's second-screen tech has been a clear focus: players can also use a linked-up smartphone or tablet to mark waypoints on the map.

There is at least some connective tissue between this and its predecessors. New protagonist Nick Ramos is a mechanic by trade and can combine weapons at any point as long as he's got the requisite parts and a blueprint. Bind a flashlight to a pistol for a tactical handgun that's essential underground; strap a circular saw to a sledgehammer for a rather more comical sledgesaw. He can dress up, too, and in the course of our demo dons a hazmat suit, police uniform, shark outfit and a short summer dress. But the low-res textures and choppy framerate hardly inspire confidence about One's capabilities, and *Dead Rising 3* has the dubious honour of being the brownest game at the show.



RYSE: SON OF ROME

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Crytek **Format** Xbox One **Release** November

Ryse is the very definition of a next-generation game, at least for a studio dedicated to engine building. The game's beach landing at Dover is a slap in the face for historical accuracy, but a dizzying barrage of next-generation physics and graphical tricks. It exists only to show the fidelity with which CryEngine 3 can splash blood, splinter wood and tear sails on massive maps with draw distances to the horizon, and the ease with which Xbox One can process so much meaningless carnage.

It's worrying that Xbox One's character-driven graphical showpiece is already a relic, a world of Dreamcast-era QTEs and scripted sequences. It stars a Roman legionary on a mission to see everything and everyone in the ancient world explode or bleed in the most convincing manner imaginable. It's a triumph of presentation, with stirring orchestral music and impeccable cinematic styling, but a game where skill plays little part and QTE success is guaranteed whether you press A on cue or not. The next generation, according to Crytek, is much like the one that before it, only this time you'll see the anguish on a fully motion captured man's face when you lop off his head. *Ryse* has plenty to show off Microsoft's new graphics tech, but it's a miserly package in a generation already being defined by new ideas made possible via connectivity.



D4

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Access Games
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

The reveal for the new episodic murder mystery by *Deadly Premonition* creator Swery65 has so many quick cuts that you might need to take a couple of aspirin afterwards. Despite the flurry of images, it's hard to miss the series of Kinect hand-gesture prompts whizzing vertically and horizontally onscreen during a fist fight aboard an aeroplane. Kinect-driven combat has us worried, although perhaps Kinect 2 can overcome the foibles that marred previous-gen games that tried it. The art style, meanwhile, is more encouraging, a deeply cel-shaded approach that adds a graphic-novel vividness to events. With *Deadly Premonition*, Swery established his love of the visual non sequitur and *D4* appears to push this even further. Stay tuned for news on why the woman in the red dress wants to touch a white owl on a frozen lake.



BELOW

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Capybara Games
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

When it comes to *Below*, indie studio Capybara Games may be making a game, but Microsoft is making a case: Xbox One will also be a destination for exciting new indie games. The only problem is that a first glance at *Below* was uninspiring. There are heartening nods to *Journey* in the mountain that beckons at the game's outset, but Capy's made the puzzling decision to use Xbox One's extra processing power to render a protagonist the size of a flea, with the camera taking in the action from a satellite in outer orbit. It wouldn't matter if there was a huge amount of visual information to convey, but the extra canvas exhibits pixel after pixel of dead space. We know it's a roguelike with some co-op element, and that's enough to keep us on the hook for now, but Capy's going to have to dig deep to justify its microcosmic art style.



HALO

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** 343 Studios
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

Companies savour the drama of pulling aside a piece of fabric draped over new products during stage announcements. Microsoft managed to mimic this stagecraft in its reveal of the next-gen *Halo*, cloaking Master Chief in nomadic robes before summoning a giant mechanised eagle from under desert stands to blow back his hood with a sonic boom. Gameplay details were absent, but with people of modest means unable to pony up for two next-gen consoles this Christmas, Microsoft needed to remind *Halo* fans who they're closing the door on if they opt for PS4. It doesn't hurt that *Halo IV* represented a high point of graphical fidelity on 360. Series fans risk drowning in their own saliva while drooling over the prospect of the performance 343 might wring from Xbox One, especially since *Halo* will run at 60fps.





MINECRAFT: XBOX ONE EDITION

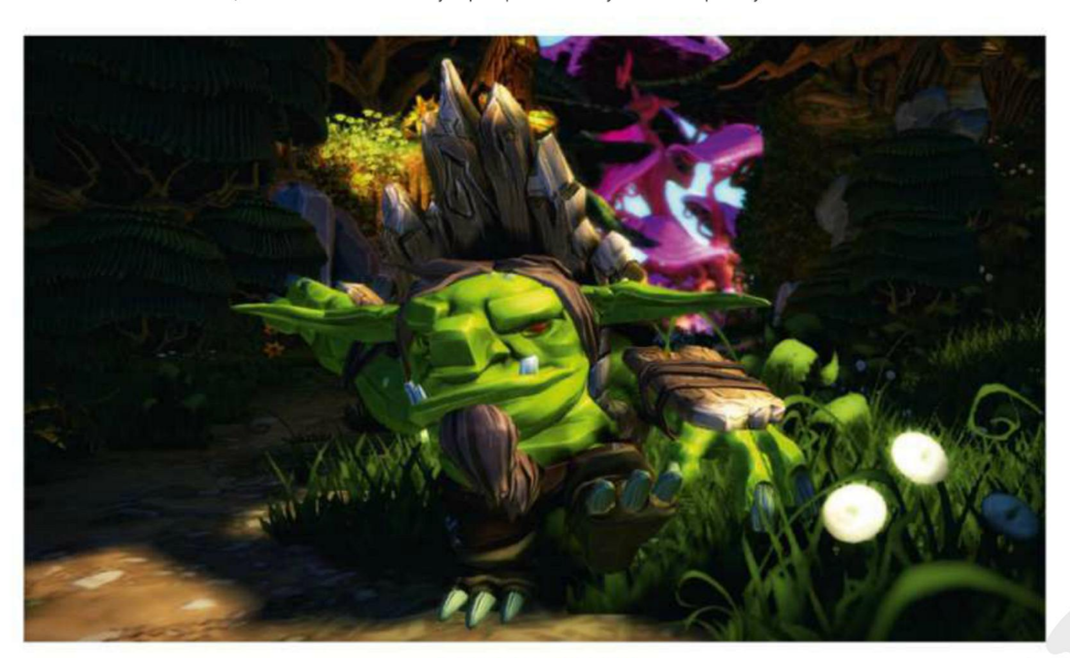
Publisher Microsoft **Developer** 4J Studios
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

With the 360 version of Mojang's game topping XBLA's sales charts by some margin, its appearance on Xbox One was all but guaranteed. Microsoft claims that this is more than a simple port, though, offering a significantly larger world as well as expanded multiplayer features and a vague promise of "other enhancements". Going by the trailer, these thankfully won't include changing the characteristic lo-fi visuals. But players who have sunk countless hours into *Xbox 360 Edition* may be reticent to switch versions if they can't bring their save game with them, and while developer 4J Studios is in talks with Microsoft to make that possible, the larger worlds on Xbox One are hampering its efforts. Still, 4J has confirmed the 360 version will continue to receive updates after *Xbox One Edition* launches, so there'll be no need to jump ship immediately.

PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE

Publisher EA **Developer** PopCap Games
Format 360, Xbox One **Release** Q2 2014

PopCap co-founder John Vechey surprised everyone by unveiling this co-op thirdperson shooter, which at last explains why the EA-owned studio spent much of 2012 recruiting staff with experience of multiplayer combat games. In a light-hearted, fourplayer spin on *Gears Of War*'s Horde mode, players control just one plant, but take a handful more into battle. Most conform to type – the Peashooter's best from range, the Chomper excels up close – but there are deviations. The Sunflower, for instance, is now a healer, while Garlic Drones float around raining bursts of gaseous green death from above. Also confirmed is the chance to play as the zombies. *Garden Warfare* is quite the departure for PopCap, but it's shot through with the studio's style and humour, both especially evident in the demo's three boss battles, each bigger than the last.



PROJECT SPARK

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Team Dakota **Format** 360, PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Despite its sprawling ambition, *Project Spark* was perhaps the most coherent Xbox One proposition shown on Microsoft's stage. A game creation tool described as an "open-world digital canvas", *Spark* enables you to define an empty world's terrain type, climate and time of day; draw in hills with a finger; and then assign behaviours to objects. By adding a 'brain', a simple rock might become a pet, with an array of behaviours. Tap a button and an avatar is dropped into the world, ready to explore your creation in thirdperson. And while you're running around, a co-op partner can continue to tinker with the world, remapping the terrain right under your feet.

While Kinect and SmartGlass integration so frequently feel crowbarred in, *Spark* uses both in additive ways. Voice control saves clicking through menus, with the touchscreen used to manipulate the land in realtime. Mouse and keyboard can also be used: this is a Windows 8 game as much as a console one, with creations – not just worlds, but behaviours – shared between platforms. And while the E3 demo builds an action-adventure, this is a flexible tool, capable of creating nods to *Marble Madness*, *Space Invaders*, *Limbo* and *Angry Birds*. Yes, *LittleBigPlanet* and Square's browser-based *Gameglobe* are its touchstones, but *Spark* looks to be a true generational leap.







UNTITLED BLACK TUSK GAME

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Black Tusk
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Now Bungie's gone multiformat, Microsoft needs a new thirdparty poster child. It's placed one-fifth of its faith in Black Tusk Studios, a team made up of industry veterans that's building the "next *Halo*". Black Tusk was rumoured to be working on a hardcore Kinect shooter for 360, but whether that project has now become an Xbox One game is unclear, as is Kinect's prominence. Studio manager Mike Crump is on record as saying that Black Tusk will focus on 360 development, but senior product manager Jonathan Browne's LinkedIn page reveals that the studio is working on four different projects. Whatever this first game is, however, all we have to go on right now is an uninspiring 28 seconds of footage in which a man wearing black abseils down a building during a firework display before incapacitating another man dressed in black.

RABBIDS INVASION

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** In-house
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

There's a minigame in *Rabbids Invasion*, Ubisoft's foray into interactive TV, that involves flinging eggs at Rabbids onscreen by simply pointing your finger at the target. Kinect does the rest. It's fun to imagine somebody walking past a living room window only to catch a glimpse of a bunch of kids pointing at their TV set. The next minigame enjoins all players in the room to scream bloody murder to virtually shatter the screen. The accidental spectator is now going to be terribly curious or concerned. If you live in a crowded apartment block and felt guilty about jumping up and down while white water rafting in *Kinect Adventures*, chances are you might not be too ecstatic about that. What we've seen looks to continue the series well enough, but it's hard to imagine how flinging eggs at hyperactive bunnies will shape the show's narrative.

MAX: THE CURSE OF BROTHERHOOD

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Press Play
Format 360 **Release** TBA

Press Play's *Max And The Magic Marker* sequel delivers on expectations. At any point during this XBLA platformer you can press the right trigger to summon a pen in order to draw vines and other features that help Max on his journey to find his brother. Release the trigger and you're back in the action. Max inadvertently banished his brother to this lush but deadly alternative dimension after catching him playing with his toys. The marker mechanic stops the action feeling too *Limbo*-like, adding a dash of *Okami* to the mix. There's a breezy cinematic CGI visual quality to it, but this approach hasn't prevented Press Play from keeping a violent edge. Max may enjoy infinite respawns but his demises can elicit a sympathetic wince, such as when one towering monster catches him, hoists him up by his legs and pummels him to death. Ow.



QUANTUM BREAK

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Remedy Entertainment **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2014

The unveiling of *Quantum Break* during Xbox One's announcement gave little away, and its second showing at Microsoft's E3 presentation was similarly vague. Another 15 minutes in a room with creative director Sam Lake and head of franchise development Oskari Häkkinen and we're a little wiser. We know that this blend of game and live-action TV will ship on a single disc, with Lake likening it to the first season of a TV show. We know it's a time-travel mystery in which the two lead characters, Jack and Beth, are able to freeze time – saving a key character from an explosion, for instance. We know it's a thirdperson shooter with a cover mechanic, where the choices you make play out in the live-action sequences. But that's about it. Remedy won't tell us who's making the TV show, saying only that Microsoft Studios is involved, and hinting at some big names to be announced down the line.

First impressions aren't great, with wooden dialogue in live-action and in-game sequences, and the latter's interactivity limited to walking between cutscenes. *Quantum Break* remains an elusive prospect, then – it reflects Microsoft's desire to introduce us to interactive TV, but it's also emblematic of Xbox One's capacity to overcomplicate. Perhaps all will become clear when we are shown, not told, why this game is important.



WORLD OF TANKS: XBOX 360 EDITION

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Wargaming West **Format** 360 **Release** Summer

Wargaming's all-conquering free-to-play game has amassed more than 60 million players across 200 countries, and the company's attention now turns to Xbox Live's 48 million registered users. The game's PC audience is broadly spread across two demographics: 50-something men who really like tanks, and younger players drawn in by the accessible controls and lack of gore. The Xbox Live charts, dominated by military shooters and sports games, raise questions about just how much of a market exists for *World Of Tanks* on 360.

The exception to that rule is, of course, *Minecraft*, and reading between the lines it seems Microsoft has been as proactive in securing a console exclusive with Wargaming as it was with Mojang. Microsoft is publishing the port, which is being developed by Wargaming West, the new name for *MechAssault* and *FEAR 3* developer Day 1 Studios. It will be free to Xbox Live Gold subscribers, though those with Silver accounts can play the game for seven days.

Wargaming West tells us Microsoft's usability resources have been a huge help in converting *World Of Tanks'* controls for 360, and the UI has also been overhauled with less text and more icons. Those changes aside, this is still very much *World Of Tanks*: an accessible, 15v15 tactical shooter that rewards teamwork, and a free-to-play game that's never grubby in its monetisation.



KILLER INSTINCT

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Double Helix
Format Xbox One **Release** 2013

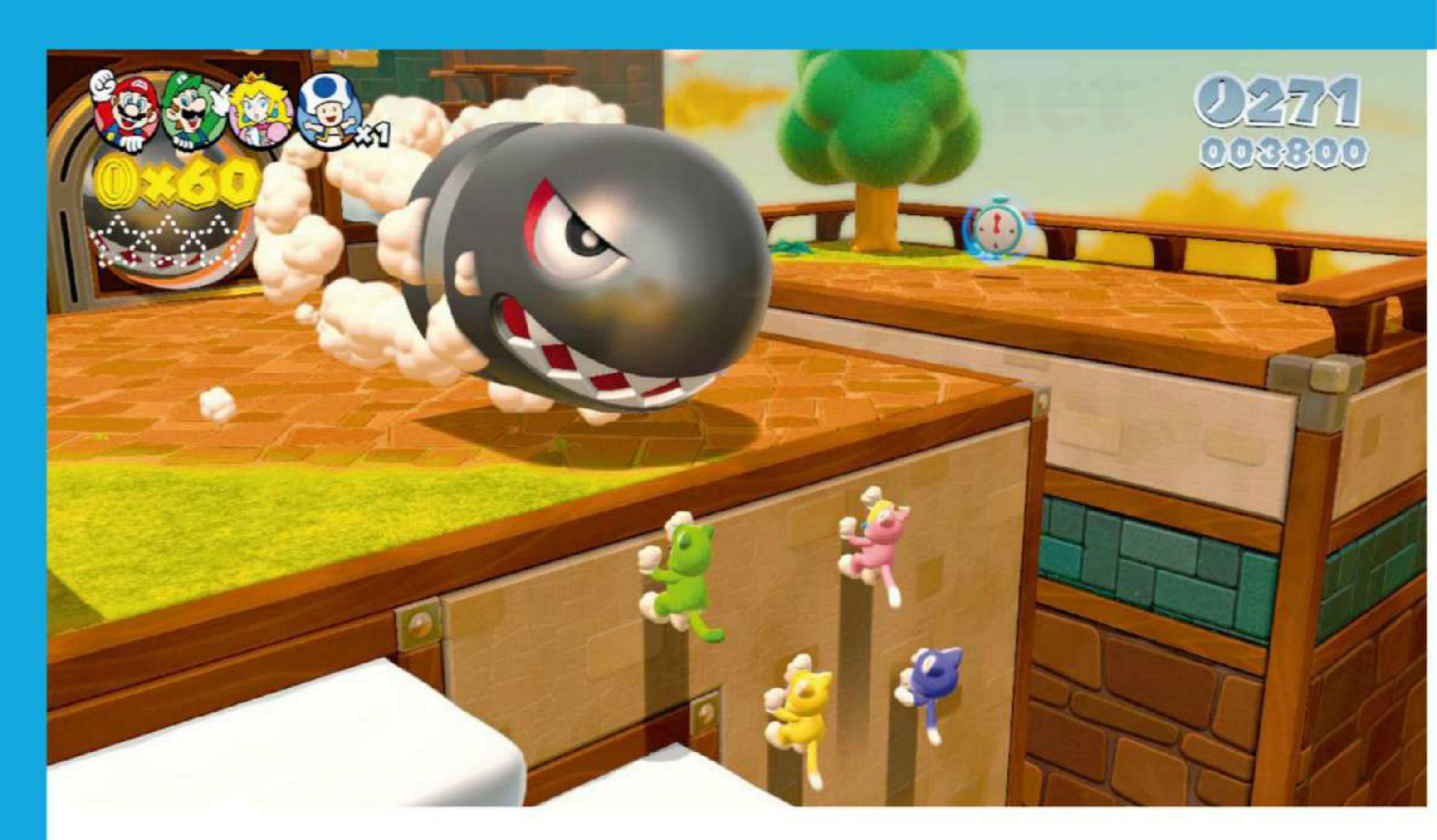
Those who gave Double Helix's fighting game reboot the biggest cheer of Microsoft's conference might have held their tongues had they known about its free-to-play business model. Just one character, Ryu analogue Jago, will be available in the initial download. Other characters, released slowly over time, will only be yours for a fee. F2P may well be the future of fighting games: Tecmo Koei and Namco have waded into freemium waters, and we're sure Capcom is eyeing them, too. Yet *Killer Instinct*'s next-gen visuals and accessible battle system, whereby you land an attack and any subsequent button press will combo, may be hamstrung if players are put off by endless Jago-vs-Jago matches. There's some shared DNA with MOBAs such as *League Of Legends*, so we can only hope for a similar rotation of free characters to encourage diversity.



FANTASIA: MUSIC EVOLVED

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Harmonix Music Systems
Format 360, Xbox One **Release** 2014

Fantasia's already enjoyed a 1991 Mega Drive platformer interpretation, but Harmonix is attempting to reimagine the film for today's audiences through Kinect. Gameplay is split across two modes, with you venturing out into the world to seek out musical magic for Yen Sid. Each stage represents a musical playground in which you can improvise and explore – so far we've seen a reef and a vintage printing press – triggering sounds and melodies as you navigate with a cursor called The Muse. Within each stage are a number of Song Portals that trigger performance levels, featuring contemporary and classic tracks, which can be remixed and manipulated through gestures. Members of both the *Rock Band* and *Dance Central* teams are collaborating, and Harmonix claims *Fantasia* will allow for greater agency than any previous music game.



SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Format** Wii U **Release** October

Nintendo's imagination is matched only, ironically, by its willingness to recycle its own ideas. *Super Mario 3D World* is its latest crossbreed, marrying – with no small amount of success, it must be said – elements of *Galaxy*, *3D Land* and 1988's *Super Mario Bros 2*.

But *Galaxy* veterans will likely be disappointed at what could be seen as a stopgap until the next 'proper' 3D *Mario*. That would be to ignore the game's merits, of course – as stopgaps go, this is a delight. It's very much a successor to 3DS's *Super Mario 3D Land*, drawn from the same asset library, with similar controls and familiar mechanics. This time, though, you can play with up to three friends, each controlling one of *SMB2*'s returning cast.

The lineup retain their original abilities: Mario is the safe all-rounder, Luigi can jump higher but is harder to control, Peach is slower but can use her dress to float, while Toad is the quickest but can't jump as far. The ground pound, long jump and double jump are all present, but *Super Mario 64*'s triple jump is still absent. Limited leaping aside, there's a real sense of verticality to the levels thanks to *3D World*'s new Cat Bell power-up, which not only allows the quartet to bound, charmingly, across levels on all fours, but also to scamper up walls, larger enemies and even the end-of-level flagpole.

You can play with up to three friends, each controlling one of Super Mario Bros 2's returning cast

The fourplayer co-op channels *New Super Mario Bros*' antagonistic spirit, with separate scores for each player and a camera that zooms out to help keep everyone onscreen. Players will still need to work together, though, with one level requiring all four to steer in unison to guide a giant swimming Yoshi through a watery assault course.

The GamePad player can guide a hand around levels, poking at the landscape to uncover secrets. The other three, meanwhile, must make do with the Wii Remote's D-pad – no Nunchuk support is planned. Given how much leeway the level design allows for moving about on all planes, the absence of analogue controls for all is a shame, and makes a mockery of the '3D' in the title. While the camera is locked in multiplayer, single players can shift it through 270 degrees, enabling you to look ahead and behind.

While *Super Mario 3D Land* was very much a product of its platform, *3D World* struggles to justify its 2.5D gameplay, or at least the absence of more open levels – this is a semi-sequel to a handheld game, rather than a *Galaxy*-style generational leap. That said, even an average *Mario* game is better than nothing, and there's much here to like – plus we expect other new power-ups will be revealed before launch. But it's hardly the confident saviour Wii U needs.

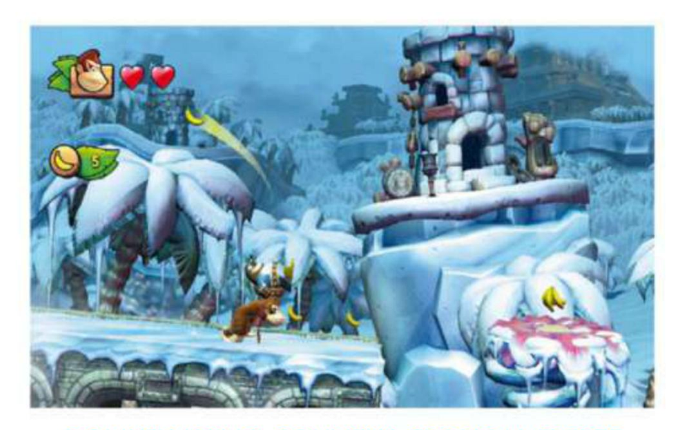


SUPER SMASH BROS

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Sora **Format** 3DS, Wii U **Release** 2014

Masahiro Sakurai seemed as surprised as the rest of us when Nintendo president Satoru Iwata announced a new *Smash Bros* for Wii U and 3DS at E3 2011. The *Kirby* creator was quick to admit that development of the game had barely begun, but much progress has been made since, with a debut trailer and a special match between Sakurai and a developer at last giving the series' passionate fanbase a glimpse of the game proper.

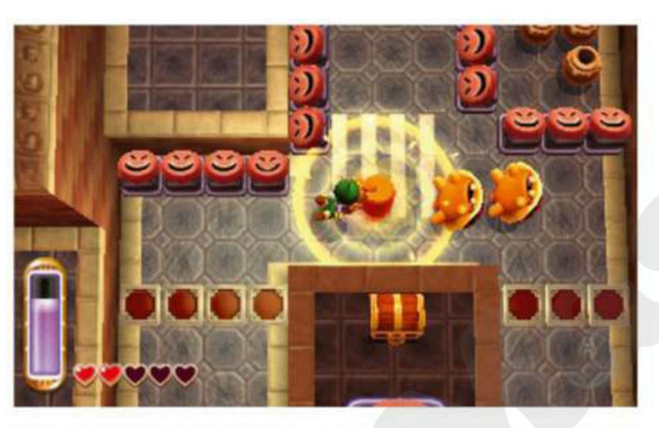
Fan service has always seemed like *Smash Bros*' primary goal, and joining the throng here are Mega Man and the female trainer from *Wii Fit*. As ridiculous as the latter sounds, she's been given quite the moveset, making for an elegant (and surprisingly hard-hitting) addition – a real athlete in a game built on slapstick foundations. In motion, little has changed. Sakurai confirmed that *Brawl*'s tripping mechanic, which randomly made characters fall over when turning or running too fast and rather killed the game as a competitive pastime, is gone. That's progress. But there's a concern that being on 3DS will adversely affect that version's design. How will the original model's screen accommodate a fully zoomed-out view of *Smash*'s trademark multistorey stages? That's quite the challenge, but one Sakurai has time to tackle. Like many of Nintendo's E3 big hitters, this isn't due till 2014.



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Retro Studios
Format Wii U **Release** November

Tropical Freeze producer Kensuke Tanabe directed *Super Mario Bros 2*, and almost 25 years later he's resurrecting that game's core mechanic: Donkey Kong pulls things from the ground to reveal items and platforms, and picks up and throws enemies. There are four playable characters, too, with DK's friends each boasting a special ability and either riding on his back or being controlled by a co-op partner. Dixie twirls her pigtails to gain height; Diddy's jetpack lengthens a jump; the third is still unknown. That aside, the principal change is in processing power and resolution, enlivening everything from DK's fuzzy fur to the black-and-blue underwater sections clearly inspired by *Rayman Origins*. But this is still a '90s platformer at heart – there's even a minecart level in the four-stage demo. Is this really everything Retro has been working on all this time?



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house
Format 3DS **Release** Q4 2013

When Shigeru Miyamoto told us last year that the one game he would most like to revisit was *A Link To The Past*, we took it as wistful contemplation of a remarkable legacy by a man facing retirement. Clearly, he knew more than he was letting on. This is no straight sequel burped out by Nintendo's retro remix machine, however; in our first hands-on, the new mechanic at the heart of 3DS's big 2013 release proves transformative. Link can turn into a 2D hieroglyph of himself, shifting into walls and cliffs to reach platforms that his 1991 equivalent never could, requiring a fresh way of looking at this familiar version of Hyrule. During portrait mode, Link's magic meter – which here also limits use of his hammer, arrows and bombs – depletes. It's a good job, then, in a concession to modern design standards, that it also refills automatically.



THE WONDERFUL 101

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Platinum Games **Format** Wii U **Release** August

How strange, in the context of Microsoft and Sony's failure to set next-gen standards for resolution and framerate, to play a Wii U game that's running effortlessly at 60fps in 1080p. *The Wonderful 101* has been built from the ground up for Wii U and proves a fine showcase of its capabilities – something the system sorely needs at this point.

GamePad integration is optional, so the right stick can be used instead of the stylus. You draw circles round bystanders on the GamePad screen to recruit them, which makes them follow you around, and their number dictates the size of the weapons you draw into existence. A straight line crafts a blue sword, an L-shape makes a green gun, a circle produces a red fist, and a squiggly line sees your throng form a pink whip.

Each, naturally, is useful against different enemy types. A well-timed punch will reflect one foe's lasers back at him, while the whip removes the demo boss's spiky armour. It's a smart setup that does much to add variety to a game with just one attack button, and there's a mad scamper to gather up scattered followers when you take a hit. Despite the cartoonish style, this is quite the challenge – something which, along with multiplayer for up to five people, adds longevity to a game that apparently can be played through within a day.



X (WORKING TITLE)

Publisher TBA **Developer** Monolith Soft
Format Wii U **Release** 2014

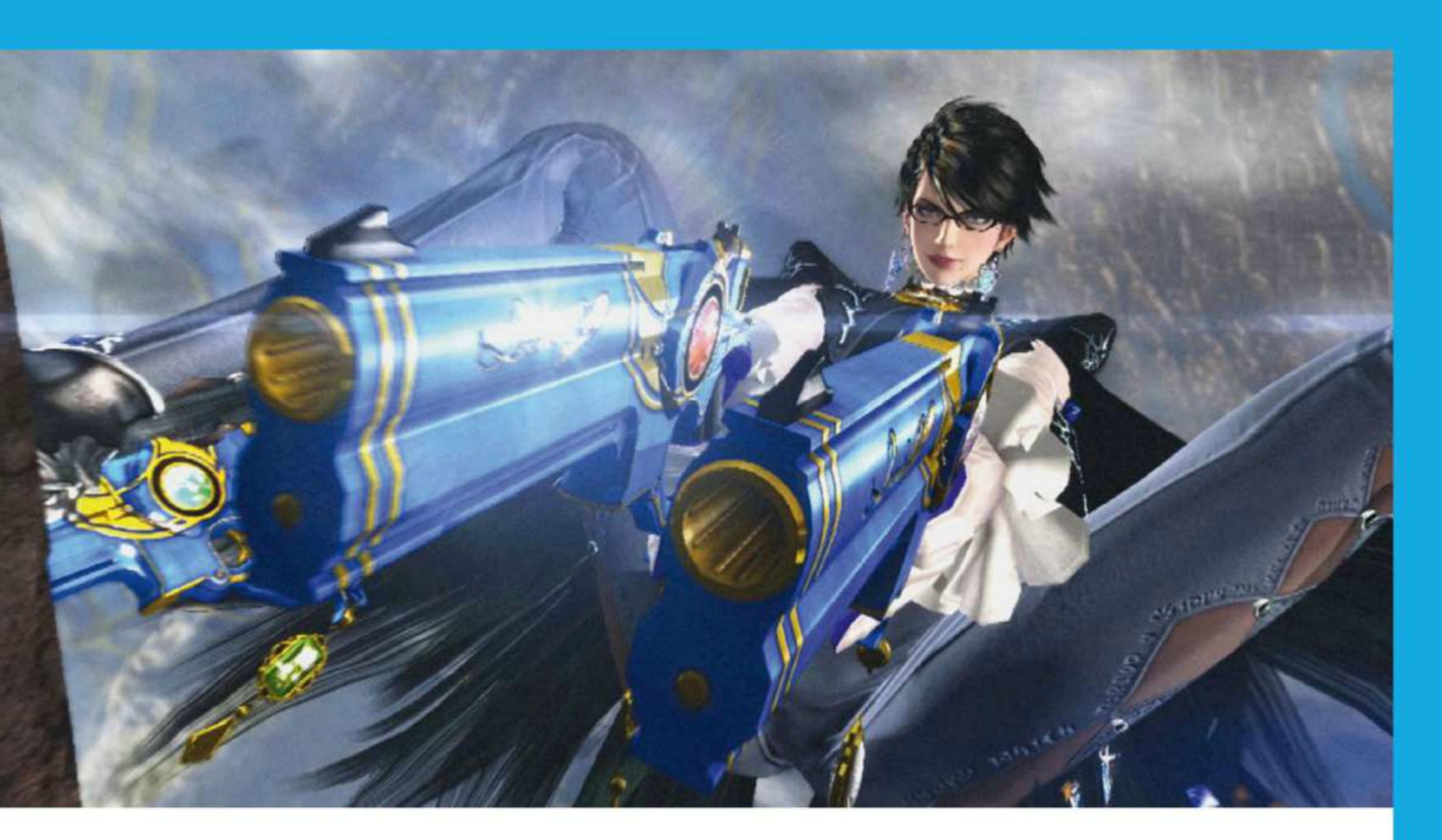
A second glimpse of Monolith's Wii U RPG yields little information but plenty to ogle. *Xenoblade Chronicles* gave us stunning vistas, but it was hard not to wonder what it might look like with its jagged edges smoothed over. Wonder no longer: taking in lush countryside, neon cityscapes and star-flecked outer space, this is a beautiful game. But it's one that we know frustratingly little about. We know Monolith founder and *Xenoblade* director Tetsuya Takahashi is helming production. We're assured we'll be able to pilot transforming mechs in a seamless open world. But this latest look at *X* is bereft of gameplay, our nameless protagonist walking, stomping and flying through one beautiful scene after another. The trailer does a good job of selling the world instead of the game within it, but we want to see if *X* has the mechanics to match its visuals.



SONIC: LOST WORLD

Publisher Sega/Nintendo **Developer** Sonic Team
Format Wii U **Release** Q4

As if Sega's exclusivity deal with Nintendo wasn't disquieting enough for veteran *Sonic* players, flagship game *Sonic: Lost World* appears to be heavily influenced by *Mario Galaxy*. Producer Takashi Iizuka denies any such homage, of course, but *Lost World*'s cylindrical levels instantly evoke *Galaxy*'s playful use of space. There are more classic-feeling *Sonic* stages, too, in the form of sections played out in 2D, and Sega promises plenty of variety in the finished game. But perhaps the biggest overhaul is the revised control scheme, which defaults to a more considered pace, allowing for precision platforming; hold the right trigger down and things get zippier, while the returning Spin Dash grants access to Sonic's top speed. It looks like one of the declining series' more creative outings in recent times, but even that might not be creative enough.



BAYONETTA 2

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Platinum Games **Format** Wii U **Release** 2014

Rumour has it that Platinum Games' brawler sequel was deep into development when it became an early casualty of then-publisher Sega's well-documented financial woes. As such, it's perhaps no surprise to find that this is pretty much business as usual for the Umbran Witch, with only a beginner-targeted touch control scheme (the less said about which, the better) and GamePad screen play marking this out as a Nintendo-published Wii U exclusive.

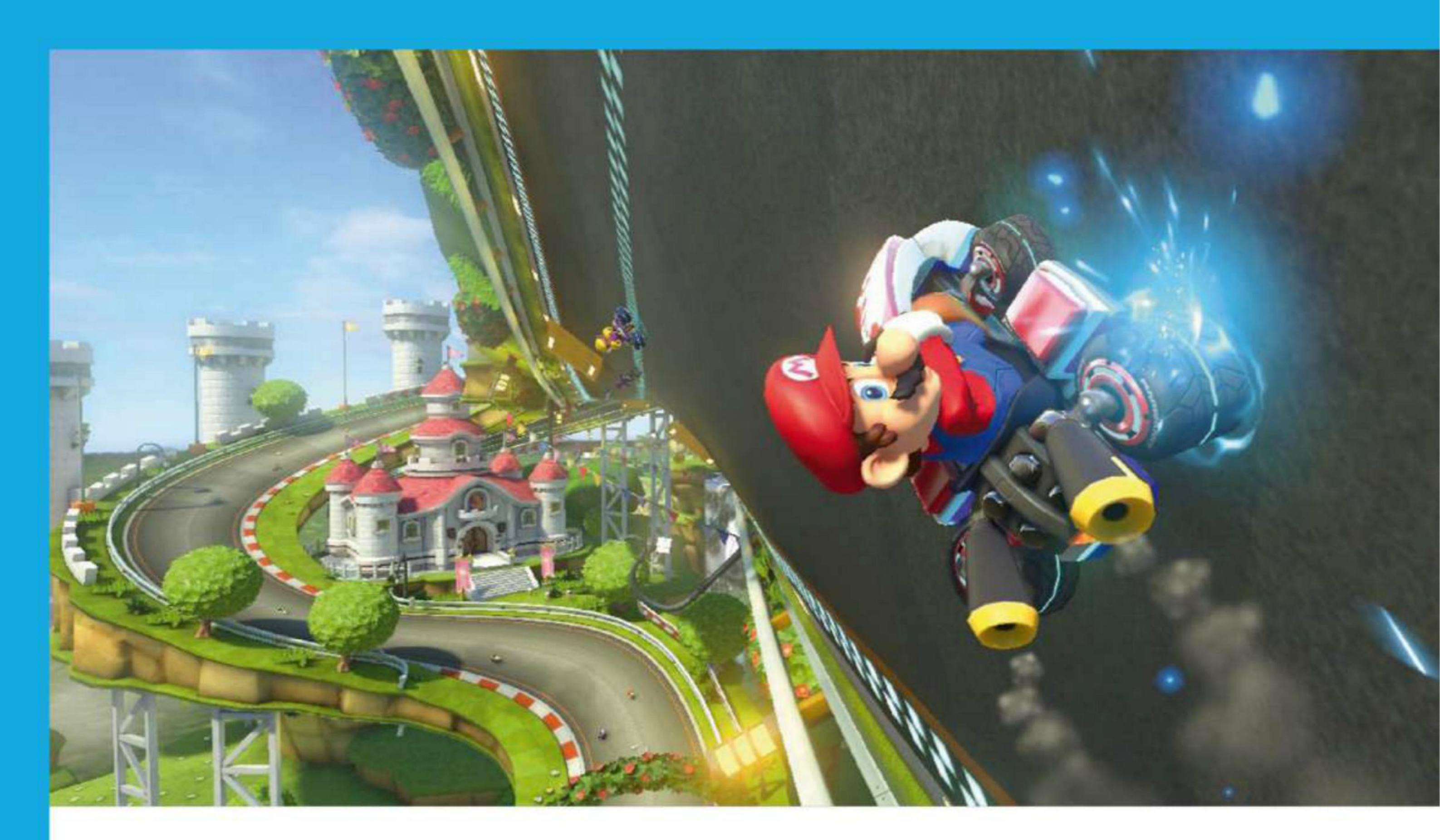
Not that it matters – given our love for the original, we'd have been happy with a direct-to-video sequel – but there are changes here. The most immediately apparent is Bayonetta's new cropped hairdo, balanced out by Jeanne's waist-length locks. The first game's rival is now a firm ally, arriving on the wing of a fighter plane that fires a couple of missiles at a boss we're fighting on top of a speeding train. The duo team up to finish off the boss, but later in our demo Jeanne's struck by a demon, her soul knocked loose from her body and dragged down to the inferno below.

There's a new mechanic, Umbran Climax, whose use is governed by a meter that fills as you land attacks, similar to Dante's Devil Trigger. There's no speed or damage boost here, however; instead, standard attacks have greater range, with many leading to unique Wicked Weave attacks. There are new weapons, too, including two whips attached to Bayonetta's feet, apparently replacing the first game's handheld Kulshedra, which was an essential tool in lengthy air combos.

This may not be a Zelda-level system seller, but it's still currently Wii U's brightest prospect by some distance

The demo's climactic boss battle against Gomorrah, the demonic dragon who knocked Jeanne into Hell, showcases the new airborne battles. Mechanically, nothing changes – you're still bound to a fixed, flat plane – but it gives the design team's already fertile imagination the licence to run even wilder. The encounter is a sight to behold, the scenery twisting around us as we scale the side of a skyscraper and the spire at its peak, requiring little more from us than the usual light-heavy-light combos and graceful cartwheels to safety.

Ah, Witch Time. Bayonetta's dodge is still one of the most pleasing systems in all of videogames, a perfect balance of risk and reward. We skip away from danger, the screen shrouded in dark blue as time slows to a crawl, giving us a few precious seconds of fetter-free damage-dealing. An all-too-brief demo on a busy show floor is seldom enough to form a rounded impression of a game's true quality, but that isn't the case here. *Bayonetta 2* is, as the name suggests, more of a good thing. While it may not be a *Zelda*-level system seller, it's currently Wii U's brightest prospect by some distance.



MARIO KART 8

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Format** Wii U **Release** Q2 2014

The *Mario Kart* series' recent return to form on 3DS raised hopes for its debut on Wii U, but going by its showing at E3, there's little to get really excited about. It's all perfectly serviceable, of course, but the limited demo – which kept us tethered to the slowest 50cc karts – made it difficult to judge the finer qualities of the game's handling model. It all clips along at a healthy 60fps, though, and is as vibrant, chunky and beautiful as you'd hope from the first ever HD *Mario Kart*.

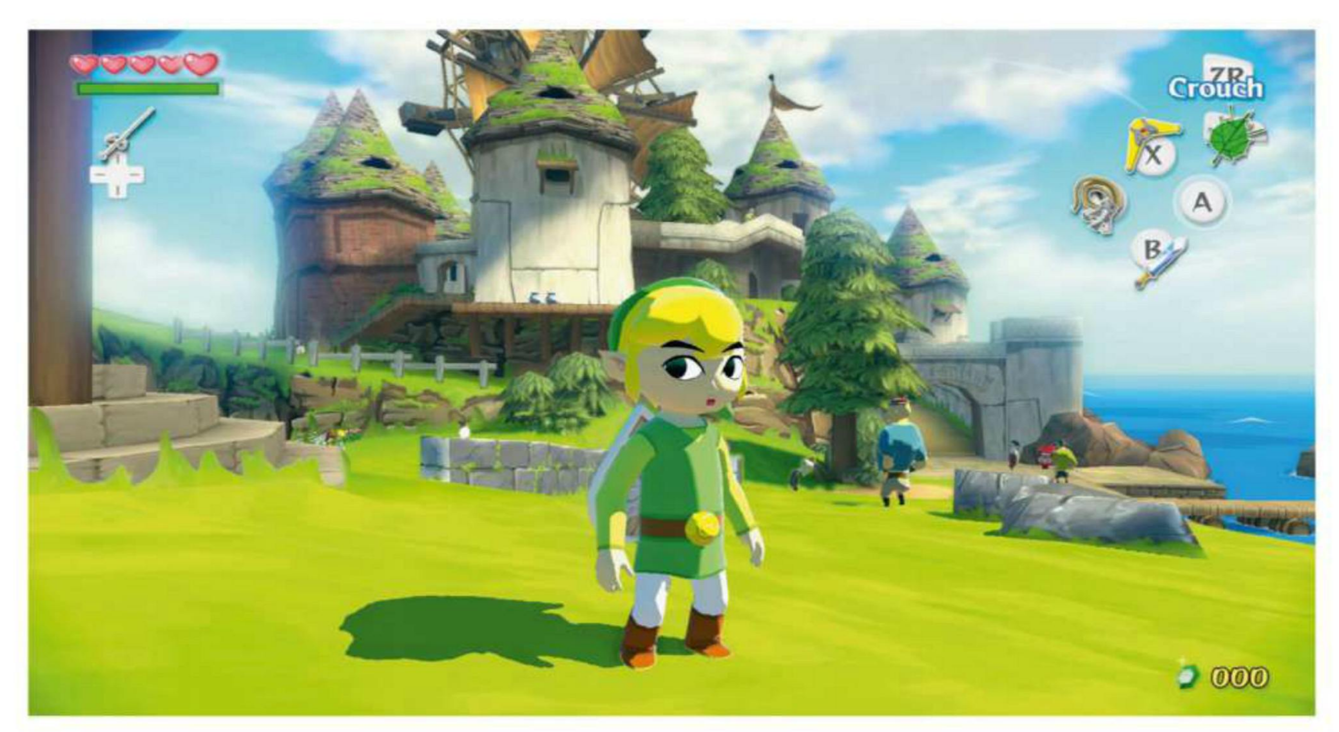
The only major change – at least at this stage – is the addition of anti-gravity segments that allow for tracks that twist and undulate in every direction. Like the hang gliders – which also make a return here – antigravity is granted automatically at the appropriate sections of track, your wheels folding down in deference to Back To The Future. While there was nothing in the demo to suggest this has any significant impact on gameplay, it certainly creates a dizzying sense of vertigo at times, and occasionally disorientates. Subtle touches, such as Peach's hair, which succumbs to gravity even when your kart won't, add to the effect.

There were 12 selectable characters in the demo, the expected lineup joined by Toadette and Waluigi, who return after their absence from *MK7*. In fact, there are many returning features, Nintendo even describing the game as a sort of *Mario Kart* greatest hits compilation. *Mario Kart 7* provides those aforementioned hang gliders as well as underwater sections – one we see in a ghost house track plummets down a flooded corridor, also using antigravity to stick you to the walls, before spitting you out at a 90-degree angle to the rest of the world. And *Mario Kart Wii*'s motorbikes and ramp tricks are also present — simply shake the controller to perform one.

The game's as vibrant, chunky and beautiful as you'd hope from the first ever HD Mario Kart

Karts can be controlled using the GamePad's touchscreen or tilt sensors – though there are no plans for a comedy oversized steering wheel to house it. There aren't any new powerups to speak of, either. At least, not yet. Nintendo wouldn't confirm if any new pickups would be announced at a later date, but it didn't deny it either. The game's not due for release until spring 2014, so there's plenty of time yet for new additions.

Online races support up to 12 players, local racing is confirmed, as well as Wii U's take on *MK7*'s communities, which allow players to customise the way they race together. And keeping up with next-gen trends, players will be able to share clips of their victories through Miiverse with a new feature called Mario Kart TV. Like *Super Mario 3D World*, however, *Mario Kart 8* feels a little by the numbers to really raise the pulse.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER HD

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Format** Wii U **Release** October

Not so much a remake as a reawakening, this is the *Wind Waker* of our rose-tinted memories, and it's looking resplendent in 1080p: sharper, smoother and more vibrant, with the bloom lighting of the early footage happily toned down. The changes aren't purely cosmetic, either: a new sail allows for optional faster travel across those gorgeous cel-shaded waves, which at first feels blasphemous, but soon proves its usefulness. Link's Picto Box now holds more photos to make Forest Haven figurines far less arduous to obtain, while elsewhere some smart Miiverse integration has replaced the Tingle Tuner, letting players send messages in bottles that may land on your shores.

Offscreen play is supported, though why you'd want a game as beautiful as this on anything but the largest, sharpest screen in the house is beyond us – particularly given the obvious benefits of the GamePad's other features. Touchscreen item management proves as convenient as it was in *Ocarina of Time 3D*; the same's true of the gyroscopic controls for Hookshot aiming. And if conducting music with the stylus is an obvious idea, it's no less delightful for it.

Most promisingly of all, Eiji Aonuma has hinted at tweaks to the endgame, promising a more satisfying conclusion than the Triforce trawl that closed the original. All that and hi-def smoke curlicues? Roll on October.



YOSHI'S NEW ISLAND

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Arzest
Format 3DS **Release** 2014

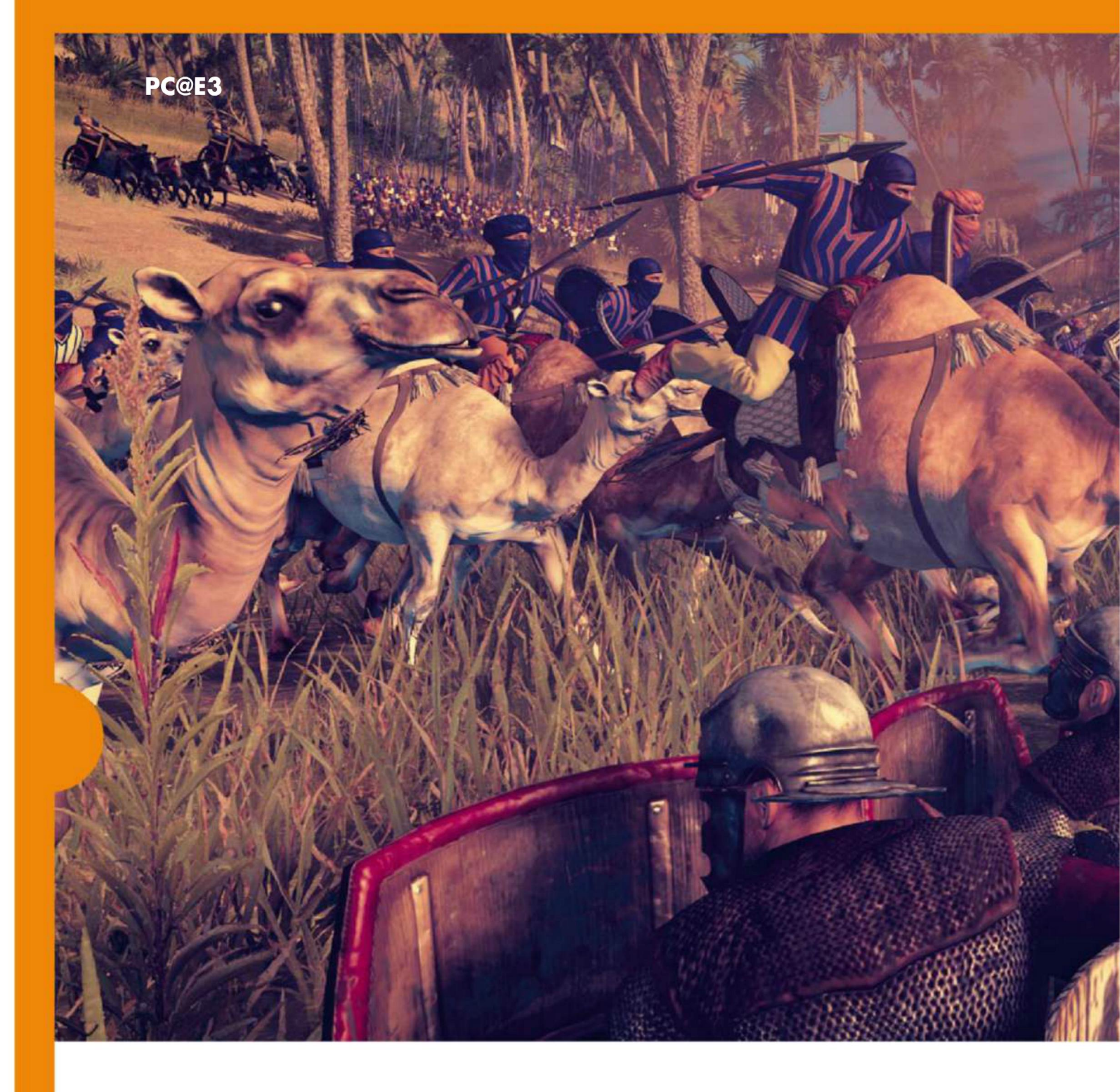
By now you'll have gathered that Nintendo's E3 lineup erred on the conservative side, and this game looked like the safest of the bunch. Were it not for a divisive new art style that's more *Yoshi's Story* than *Island*, you'd be hard pushed to tell it apart from the original. As before, you ferry Baby Mario through a series of colourful stages, picking up coins and flowers, and consuming enemies that are excreted into eggs to be hurled at other enemies. Beyond the ability to turn larger foes into giant eggs that can destroy obstacles, it's hard to see what's 'new' about this at all – there's none of the dizzying creativity of the SNES game, and the action feels sluggish and laboured. Nintendo has at least hinted that the full game will feature a range of art styles, so we can only hope they're all more attractive than the one showcased in the E3 demo.



PIKMIN 3

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house
Format Wii U **Release** July

The ESRB notice warns of mild cartoon violence, but *Pikmin 3*'s combat is far more vicious than that suggests, as an angry confrontation between winged Pikmin and a wasplike swarm proves. Your new allies are adaptable, useful for tackling airborne opponents, carrying citrus treasures over streams, and lifting gates to allow ground-based allies to pass beneath. Yellow Pikmin's static charge can be used to power cables, too, in one example switching on a powerful light that causes platforms to spring to life. Meanwhile, a multiplayer battle mode sees rival captains competing to collect fruit in order to fill lines on a bingo card while sabotaging opponents' plans with a bombardment of rocks. GamePad implementation is useful but hardly revelatory; Miyamoto would rather that players use RemotePlus for more accurate Pikmin throwing.

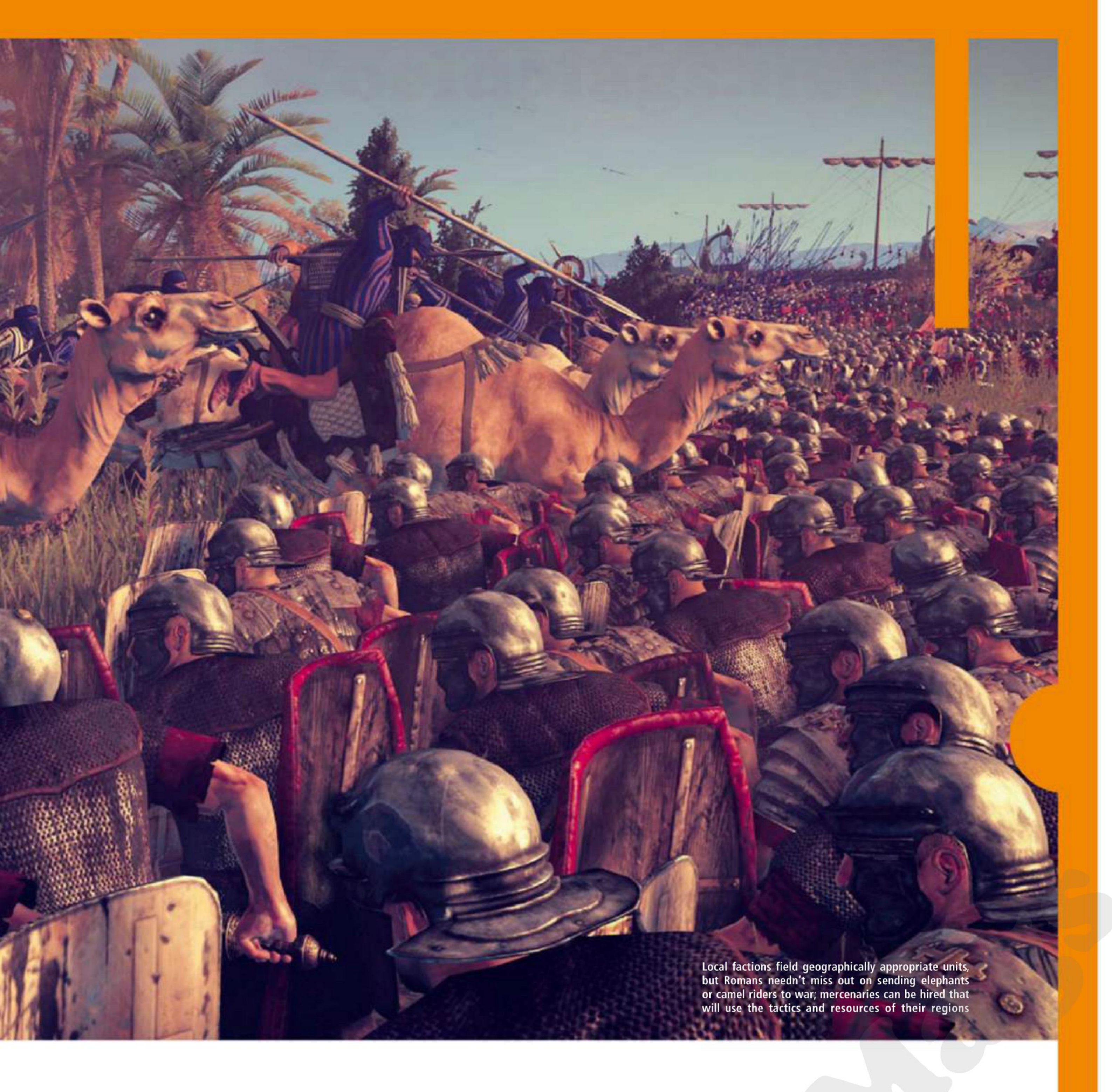


TOTAL WAR: ROME II

Publisher Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Format** PC **Release** September 3

Creative Assembly's hands-on *Total War: Rome II* demo sees Ptolemy XIII's Egyptian armies controlling a patch of high ground and Caesar's Roman legions advancing on the foot of the hill while the factions' navies clash at sea. An aggressive break by the Roman ships can deposit a force behind Egyptian lines, but it seems safer to have them rendezvous with the main body of our army and then advance on the hill, bypassing any seafaring Egyptians. Then disaster strikes: our enemies have secreted elephant-riding cavalry in the woodland between the legion and the hill. What now?

It would have been so much easier to talk our way out of this, but Creative Assembly made a hash of diplomacy and then handed us control for the repercussions. *Rome II*'s enhanced diplomatic options would normally make avoiding battle a viable option, with marriage, assassination, trade agreements and charm all greasing wheels more

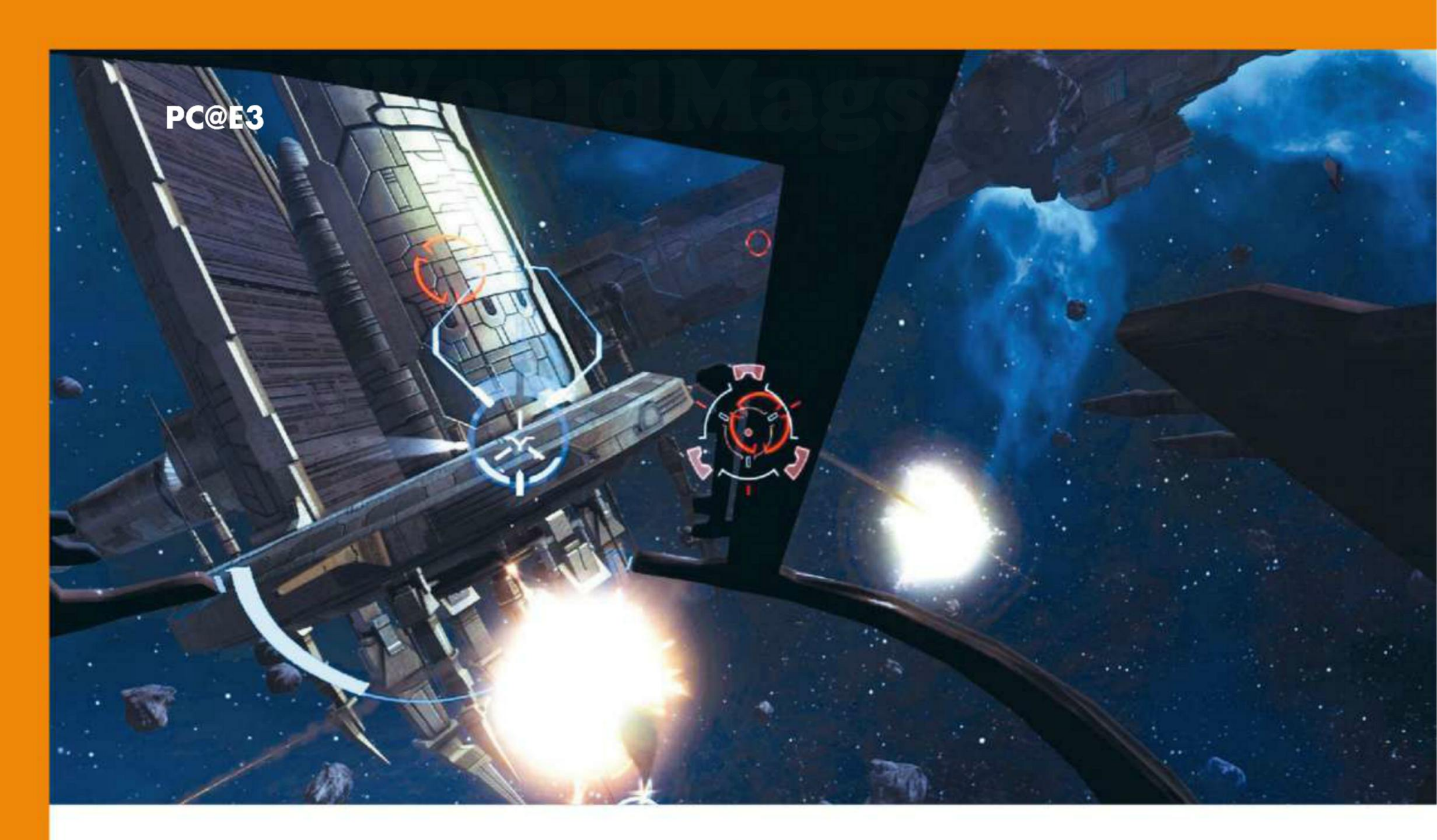


Local factions field geographically appropriate units, but Romans needn't miss out on sending elephants or camel riders to war; mercenaries can be hired that will use the tactics and resources of their regions

effectively and transparently than ever. Faction-specific victory requirements mean there's no inexorable march towards an endgame where the entire known world turns on you, so for the first time it's almost possible to avoid total war in *Total War* – but only almost.

The real Battle Of The Nile was fought in 47 BC and ended in victory for the Romans, which makes Julius Caesar a more competent general than most E3 attendees. Playing the Egyptian faction is the battle's easy mode, with the advantages of high ground, elephant cavalry and Volkswagen-sized boulders to throw at the advancing legion. The Romans face a series of obstacles, which gradually grinds our army down. With as many soldiers fleeing as dying, by the time we arrive atop the hill the battle is being fought by a skeleton crew in broken formations. The battle is lost. But victory is feasible if units are micromanaged carefully. As armies march across Europe, north Africa and the Middle East, victorious forces will receive 'Traditions' – unit-specific perks that benefit their resolve and fighting abilities in specific situations – as well as the usual stat upgrades awarded to veteran units.

But our E3 hands-on demonstrates only the broadest changes for the broadest audience. The real measure of *Rome II* will be at the tactical level, in testing the interactions of its different forces on procedurally generated terrain, and the strength of Creative Assembly's AI. But *Total War*'s pedigree and technical prowess are already assured, and *Rome II* is shaping up to be the safest entry point into the series' unending string of conflict since its original visit to Rome.



EVR

Publisher CCP Games **Developer** In-house **Format** PC **Release** TBA

The next generation of consoles offers the expected raft of technical advancements, but to experience the only interstellar jump forwards in the melding of new gaming technology and software at this year's E3 was to try CCP's Oculus Rift-powered space dogfighting game. *EVR* was built in four weeks by a small team of *EVE Online* staff in their spare time, and the game swaps out the space MMOG's vast strategic battles in favour of short bursts of fast-paced arcade-style action between two flight wings of six.

You play as a pilot in a small, X-Wing-esque starfighter, and each round begins with you sitting in the long launch tube of a larger spaceship. With the Rift strapped to your face, you look down and see your jumpsuited body beneath you, and look above and behind to see the cockpit that surrounds you. A counter ticks down, and then you're thrust forward, your tiny craft jettisoned from its mothership into the three-dimensional battlefield.

Your craft is in perpetual movement, directed with a 360 pad. But as one of the first games specifically designed with Rift in mind, *EVR* is able to use the player's head movements as part of its mechanics in a way that retrofitted games such as Adhesive Games' *Hawken* can't. While your ship's lasers fire directly forward with a squeeze of the right trigger, your heat-seeking missiles are launched by first turning your head to look at an enemy ship, holding down the left trigger until you achieve missile lock, and then letting the trigger go. It's tremendously satisfying, and frantically looking out of your top window to catch sight of a pursuing enemy as you bank around is a quintessentially Star Wars-like experience that had previously been beyond the reach of videogames.

With the Rift strapped to your face, you look down and see your jumpsuited body beneath you

CCP has let people play *EVR* at both its EVE Fanfest event in Iceland and again at E3, but there's no concrete plan for the future of the game. It could end up as an extension of the larger *EVE Online* universe, much like PS3 FPS *Dust 514*, or it could simply be a standalone project. CCP was taking meetings with interested partners throughout E3, but was in no rush to set anything in carbonite. Given that the consumer Rift unit isn't yet available (Oculus VR recently received an injection of $16 million in funding to help get it into production), there's not even a feasible market for the game at the moment.

Yet as soon as there is, *EVR* will be there. The game was designed by QA leads on *EVE Online* using Rift prototypes the company received for backing the device's original Kickstarter project, but as soon as the company's management played the game, they immediately fell in love. So did we.



HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER

Publisher Devolver Digital **Developer** Dennaton Games
Format PC **Release** TBA

The first *Hotline Miami* bolted you into the brain of a terrible man committing top-down murder in a scuzzy, neon world. It had a driving rhythm to both its soundtrack and its action, and the '80s setting and video-nasty style helped it become a huge success. Its sequel, *Wrong Number*, made a surprise appearance at E3. Well, sort of. In typical indie style, the game didn't have a booth. Instead, it was to be found in an Airstream trailer in a nearby car park – to be found by those who knew it was there at least. The game began life as an expansion, but grew in scope as designers Jonatan 'Catcus' Söderström and Dennis Wedin added more missions. Despite the expanded size, don't expect a radical departure from the first game. And with the original heading to PS3 and Vita, expect the sequel to spread beyond PC eventually, too.



MOEBIUS

Publisher Pinkerton Road **Developer** In-house
Format PC **Release** TBA

Few games funded by Kickstarter made the trip to E3, but *Moebius* was among them. The Jane Jensen-penned adventure game received $435,316 in funding in May, comfortably clearing its $300K target. The E3 presentation gave the world its first look at protagonist Malachi Rector in motion. An antiquities dealer whose Manhattan store is destroyed by a fire, Rector is hired by one Amble Dexter to investigate a series of eerie events, beginning with the death of a young woman. The story that follows is a metaphysical thriller, familiar territory for the creator of the *Gabriel Knight* adventure series. The presentation highlighted Jensen's smart dialogue, which shakes off any potential Twilight-esque juvenilia by being typically grown-up, and the art style is equally deft, mixing 2D comic-book colouring and 3D character animation.



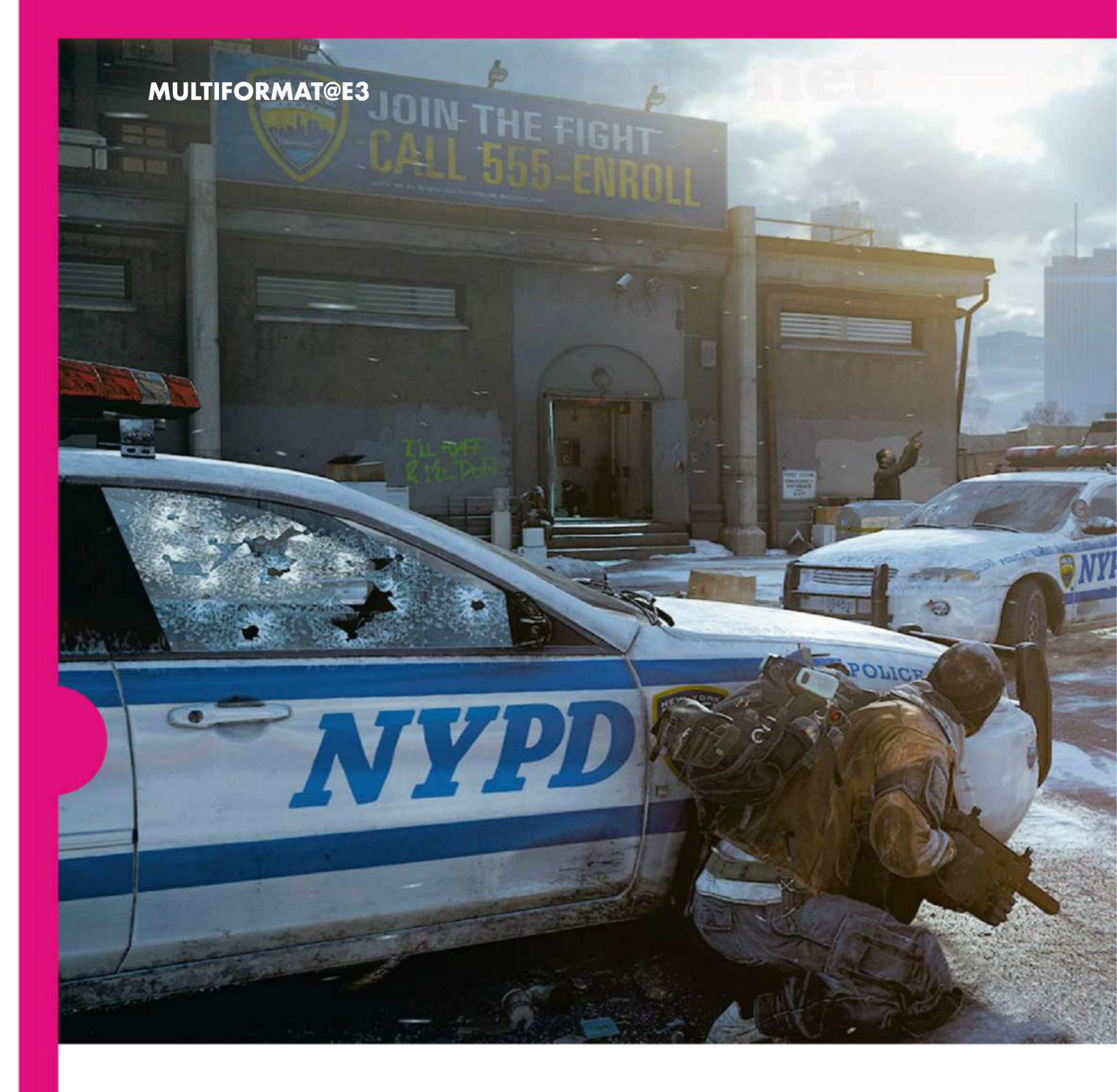
DAY Z

Publisher Bohemia Interactive **Developer** In-house **Format** PC **Release** 2013

The standalone version of Dean Hall's popular *Arma II* survival mod was originally scheduled for launch in late 2012. So protracted had the delay become that we couldn't help but wonder whether it had been quietly signed to a next-gen console. That didn't come to pass, though Hall tells us it may make the leap over later, with PS4 more likely given Microsoft's policy on self-publishing and patches. The main reason for the delay was the move to a new engine, though the arrest of two Bohemia staffers also hampered progress.

The new *DayZ* was playable for the first time at E3. Aside from being prettier, with more maps and enterable buildings, there's been a real effort to make it more accessible. There have been broad revisions to the inventory, making it less likely you'll bleed to death because you can't apply a bandage.

DayZ takes *Arma III*'s obtuse simulation and adds the need to eat food and drink water, plus introduces the incessant risk of being killed both by zombies and other players with designs on the beans in your backpack. The sandbox world often feels more like a social experiment than a game; there's the risk of catching viruses from fellow players and the need to find medication to treat them, a granular injury system that extends as far as individually broken bones, and the need to find fires or other heat sources to remain warm.



TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** In-house (Ubisoft Massive) **Format** PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

This open-world RPG-shooter is this year's *Watch Dogs*: the big Ubisoft surprise no one saw coming. Swedish studio Ubisoft Massive worked on *Far Cry 3*'s multiplayer mode, but while that was a hived-off addition to Ubi Montreal's tropical open-world game, *The Division* has been built from the ground up with multiplayer in mind.

The titular group is a government agency set up to deal with the fallout from a pandemic, based on a 2001 real-world study that revealed just how quickly America would fall apart. Years later, it comes to pass: an outbreak on Black Friday, the busiest US shopping day of the year, wreaks chaos within days. Players are dropped into New York City three weeks after the outbreak, and it's in tatters. It's still beautiful, Massive's new Snowdrop engine helping create a recognisable, believable Big Apple in midwinter, with swirling snowflakes ticking the E3 particle-effects checkbox, and steam



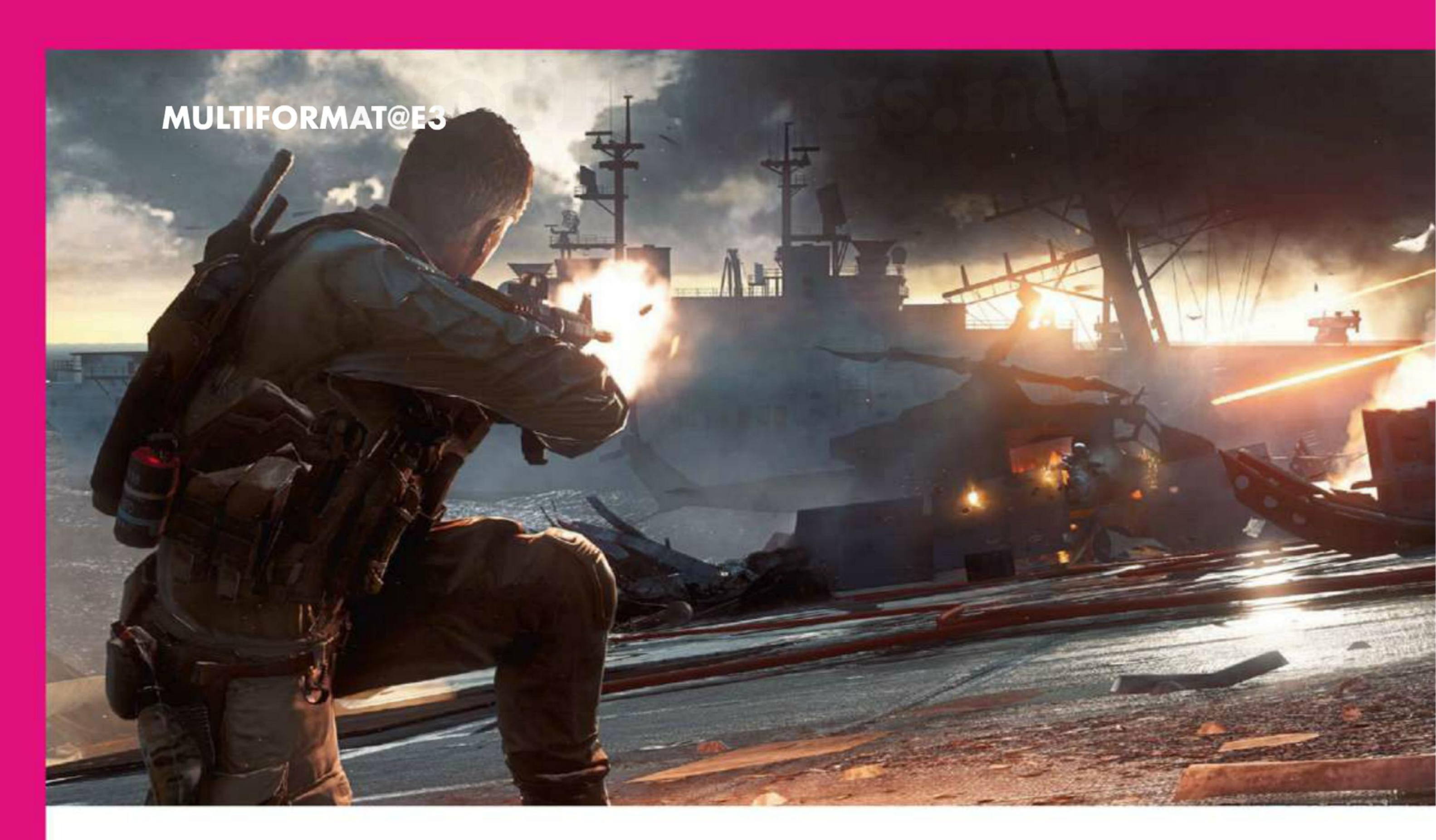
Our demo concludes with a brief look at a second-screen mode in which one player views the action from an isometric view on an Android tablet, calling out enemy positions and dropping an airstrike to clear the way

billowing out of vents and manhole covers. When we head indoors, the use of light and shadow is remarkable, powered by dynamic global illumination, a truly next-gen technique; current consoles have no problem lighting a static scene, but open a door and everything goes to pot. The tricks don't end there, either. There's no map screen – an augmented-reality overlay of the area appears beneath your feet. Menus, meanwhile, are a virtual pop-up from your agent's wristwatch.

Mechanically, this is a tactical, thirdperson cover shooter that rewards teamwork – very much in the Clancy mould. Following the template set down by *Assassin's Creed's* viewpoints and *Far Cry 3*'s outposts, here you're tasked with restoring a police station before you can begin work on the surrounding area. We free a couple of cops who have been locked up in their own cells, scavenge some food and water for ourselves, and head back outside.

Unusually for an online shooter, but appropriately for a nation in ruins, *The Division* has no class system. Instead players will pick specialisms and loadouts as they progress, but can change them at any time. The demo's three characters take on the classic trinity setup – heavy, assault, support – but at one point switch roles on the fly.

If there's one note of disappointment, it's that *The Division* hasn't yet been confirmed for PC, raising worrying questions about Ubisoft's attitude to the platform. But while this year's E3 hardly lacked open-world games, online shooters, or paranoid cautionary tales about the collapse of US society, *The Division* still stood out among them.



BATTLEFIELD 4

Publisher EA **Developer** DICE **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 29 (US), November 1 (EU), Q4 (PS4, Xbox One)

DICE's stage demo, ripped from *Battlefield 4*'s campaign, was precision engineered to steal every last crack of *Call Of Duty*'s thunder. It ran at 1080p, at 60fps, and everything exploded, but for all that bombast it's still a DICE campaign, and a long line of misjudged singleplayer modes rather sucks the promise out of *Battlefield 4*'s screen-filling Michael Bayisms. No, the real game is online, as it always has been, and *Battlefield 4*'s multiplayer is about addition, refinement and fixes. Mostly fixes.

Additions include Commander Mode, where one player works from their TV or tablet to issue orders to squad leaders – orders they may choose to ignore – as well as drop air support or supplies on units in trouble. The refinements are all about addressing the kind of problems players have griped over since the first *Bad Company*: an extra man on every squad, 64 players per server on consoles, and yet another rebalance for the class system, which now allows everyone to carry some kind of carbine and puts C4 back in the hands of Recon units.

Finally, the fixes. You made Wake Island too big, we tell *Battlefield 4*'s multiplayer producer, **Aleksander Grøndal**. "I agree!" he says. And there were too few collapsible buildings, we continue. "Again, I agree." *Battlefield 3* was a game on a massive scale with none of *Bad Company 2*'s granularity, missing the sense of player impact on every map and careful direction DICE somehow engineered into every online encounter. "We'll have those kinds of maps with one- and two-storey houses where you can just carve your own path through the buildings" Grøndal says. "I love *Bad Company*, and I admit that *Battlefield 3* didn't deliver what we wanted on the destruction level, so we want to make sure everything goes down."

One player works from their TV or tablet to issue orders to squad leaders – orders they may ignore

Even the carefully stage-managed maps, such as E3's Siege Of Shanghai, are dynamic. Shopfronts and building fascias can be collapsed, bollards can be raised to obstruct vehicles, accidentally triggered car alarms will alert enemies to your presence, and hydrants and sprinkler systems cloud your vision, presenting a compelling reason to aim straight. In Shanghai, there exists only one building that can be felled, but the effect is dramatic. The collapse of an entire skyscraper reshapes the map and reduces view distances as dust fills the streets, effectively blinding chopper pilots and closing combat distances. *Battlefield 3* traded destruction for scale and *Bad Company* traded scale for console server headcounts, but *Battlefield 4* is a *Battlefield* game without any such concessions. This time, in other words, DICE has no excuses.





THE CREW

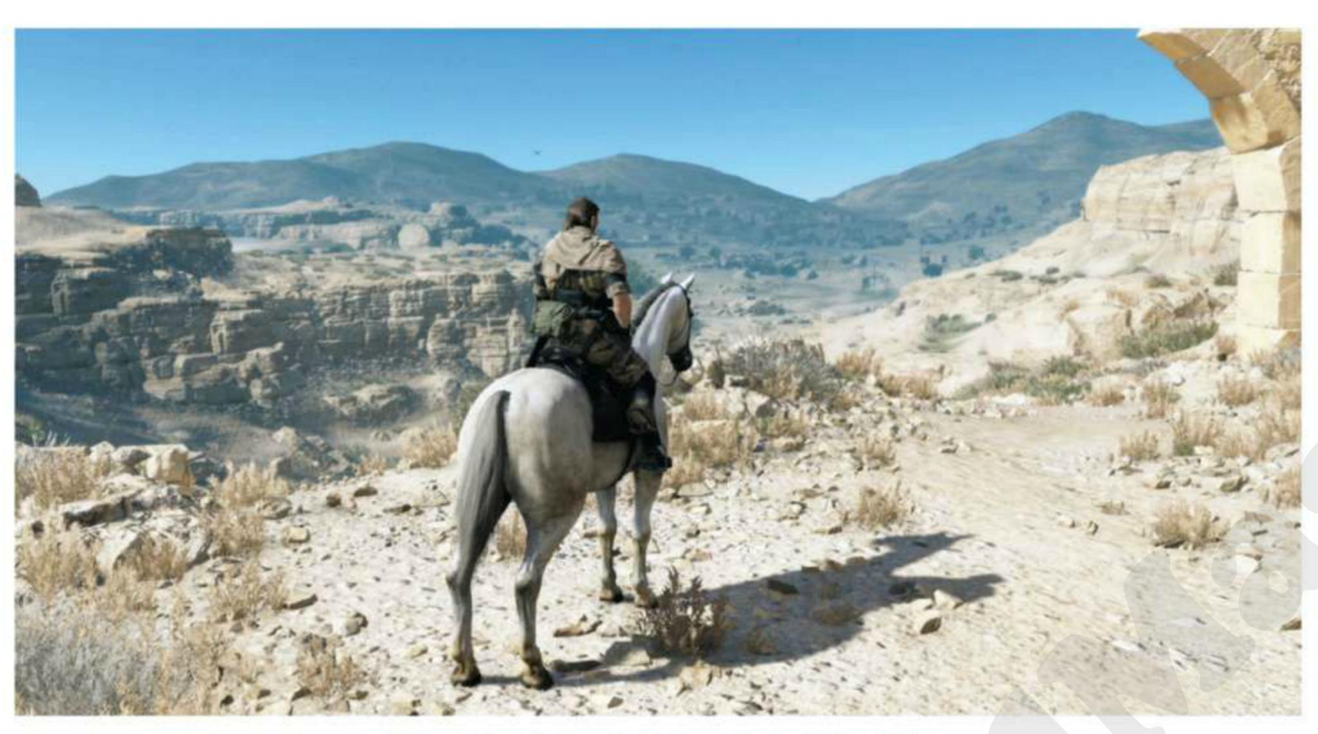
Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** Ivory Towers
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

Seven years on from *Test Drive Unlimited*, Eden Games' recreation of Oahu has never been bettered. The core team left to form Ivory Tower studios in 2007, and is doing in *The Crew* what *Test Drive* couldn't. Oahu just wasn't big enough, so Ivory Tower has built America. Because much of the US is better flown over than driven past, the scale has been compressed. Major cities – Vegas, Miami, Chicago – are to their real-life counterparts what *GTA IV*'s Liberty City was to New York, and the vast expanses in between are dramatically smaller. But so much of the country is there that it presents a gripping illusion, especially when populated by other drivers in their custom vehicles. While every next-gen racer has its own idea about connectivity, *The Crew* is a true MMOG at a scale to dwarf the others' road miles combined.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** In-house **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U **Release** October 29 (US), November 1 (EU), Q4 (PS4, One)

When we first saw the naval sections of *Assassin's Creed III*, it was clear Ubisoft Montreal had built the best Pirates Of The Caribbean game it is possible to make without tripping over Disney's copyright. The gameplay footage from E3 shows the decision to double-down on the naval portions of *ACIII* was the right call. A pirate outpost in the West Indies after nightfall provides the perfect backdrop for an explosive bombardment finale. The obscenely talented environment artists who brought the natural frontier bordering the American colonies to life have recreated the tropical jungles of the West Indies with lavish results. We also see protagonist Edward Kenway, grandfather of Connor, making use of the jungle canopy as convenient cover for stealthy creeping. Let's just hope there's at least one character in *Black Flag* as likable as Jack Sparrow.

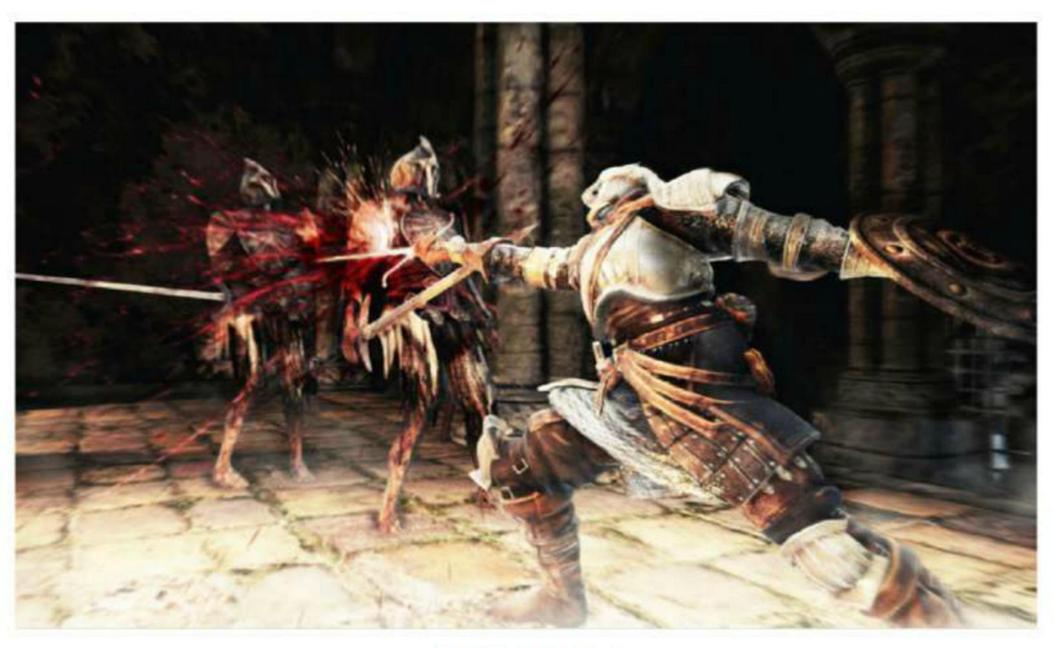


METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Publisher Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions **Format** 360, PS3 PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

While his stalking grounds have been expanding since *Metal Gear Solid 3*, Snake is now going fully open world. It's a fitting advance in scale for the first game in the series to span two generations of hardware on release, and lends *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* a more action-oriented backbone. That's not to say that Kojima has in any way downplayed stealth options, as evidenced by the introduction of realtime weather – think of the cover provided by a dramatic sandstorm – and the realistic passage of time. Traversing this larger world calls for new modes of transport, including a range of military vehicles and a horse. Snake even has a move whereby he can slide down the side of his steed while riding to conceal himself from the enemy. This, clearly, is a Kojima as in thrall to *Red Dead Redemption* and Deadwood as to cinema.

Divisively, series veteran voice actor David Hayter has been replaced by Kiefer Sutherland, whose performance-captured visage will take on the roles of Big Boss and Solid Snake. Kojima Productions is also collaborating with its recently opened LA studio on a vast multiplayer component, though there's little information to be gleaned about it right now. It all adds up to a game Konami promises will offer "unparalleled strategic freedom", and one that should afford Kojima unparalleled opportunities for faintly ridiculous plot escalations.



DARK SOULS II

Publisher Namco Bandai **Developer** FromSoftware **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** March 2014

Despite widespread murmuring over FromSoftware's push for accessibility, the only truly bad *Dark Souls II* news to come out of E3 was its release date. Our first hands-on confirms that this is still *Dark Souls*, albeit with visual and mechanical improvements. Improved AI and animation mean enemies now launch straight into multihit combos of their own, which can do a lot of damage. Your foes backstep, and kick to break your guard; they don't dumbly commit themselves while you sit there with your shield up. The demo boss ends combos with a thrust designed to catch you as you try to backroll to safety. *Dark Souls II*'s new engine also does away with the first game's canned animations: if you're surrounded by a group, you can't game the animation system and buy yourself time with the invincibility frames of a backstab or riposte. We die a lot.

We still have concerns. Enemies now drop healing items called Lifegems – both they, and Estus swigs, refill our maxed-out health bar. If they're drops, chances are you can buy them too. You can warp between bonfires you've visited from the start, so will we forge the same connection to *Dark Souls II*'s world that we had to its predecessor's? Maintaining the series' precarious balance will be key. Maybe March 2014 isn't so long to wait if it gives FromSoftware the time to get it right.



BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** In-house (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3, Wii U **Release** October 25

Warner Bros Montreal's *Batman: Arkham Origins* at first appears nearly identical to its Rocksteady predecessors, which is equal parts comforting and concerning. But our time with it revealed a number of differences. This is an origin story that recounts the time when Black Mask ordered Batman's execution, putting eight assassins on the hit, and the Dark Knight feels less refined in combat, relying more on brute force than technique, as befits his inexperience. Crime scene investigations are more in-depth, too: enter Detective mode and you'll be able to scan the environment for evidence, each piece adding to a timeline as you go. Once complete, you'll be able to watch a wireframe reconstruction of the crime, following the trail back to its perpetrator. And Batman has a new Batclaw, which acts much like *Just Cause*'s grappling hook.



NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS

Publisher EA **Developer** In-house (Ghost Games)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 19, TBA (PS4, Xbox One)

Need For Speed Rivals was one of E3's more curious casualties, lost among the DRM debates, new franchises and more dramatic takes on connectivity, such as *Forza 5*'s crowdsourced AI. *Rivals*' own connectivity was poorly sold at EA's stand, but this is *Demon's Souls* with engines – a racing game where you're never safe from another player's invasion. *Need For Speed*'s return to the cops-and-racers model last seen in *Most Wanted* adds impromptu matchmaking to the singleplayer campaign, silently dropping player-controlled cars among AI-driven pursuit squads or inserting multiple players among the fleeing racers' ranks. The unexpected arrival of another player is a magic trick that never fails to surprise, so while *Rivals*' forgiving handling model and rural open world are predictable, the minute-to-minute experience of playing it never is.







WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

Publisher Bethesda Softworks **Developer** MachineGames
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Q4

MachineGames' *Wolfenstein* reboot has a dual heritage. Its developer is full of Starbreeze veterans, whose work on the *Riddick* games shows in *The New Order*'s brutalist vision of an alternate 1960 where the Nazis won. The minimal HUD and environmental puzzle-solving – BJ Blazkowicz is armed with a precision laser cutter that allows him to slice away at the environment in real time – suggest a more grounded, physical take on a classic. *The New Order* doesn't reject its origins, though. In arena combat scenarios, its debt to its predecessors is clear: you need to hoover up medpacks and armour to stay alive, and can carry dozens of weapons at once. Storming down a corridor dual-wielding shotguns proves that *Wolfenstein*'s origins haven't been forgotten in the drive to establish a new identity.

THIEF

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Eidos Montreal
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Rumours swirl about *Thief*'s troubled development, but it's still a surprise to find so many clumsy systems and so much dim-witted stealth in E3's hands-on demo. This *Thief* is to *Thief: Deadly Shadows* what *Hitman Absolution* was to *Blood Money*: a grasp at mass-market appeal at the expense of the systemic intricacies that made the series so good in the first place. Guards seem half-blind, combat is cumbersome, the world is a series of boxes. While this first hands-on needed to keep things simple to survive the harsh environment of the show floor, a series with a mission like The Cradle to its name should never be so terminally grey, so short on inspiration or so lacking in elegance. If nothing else, *Thief* should meet the fantasy of being a stealthy cat burglar, but at the moment it makes you feel like just a common thug.

YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z

Publisher Tecmo Koei **Developer** Spark Unlimited
Format 360, PS3 **Release** 2014

Ninja Gaiden's Ryu Hayabusa hacks at Yaiba's arm and face. Later, Yaiba returns with a cyborg arm and eye as the protagonist in a war against a zombie army. This is your plot. *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* is a slapstick fighter, thick with grindhouse tropes and comedy cutscenes, but little resemblance to *Ninja Gaiden*. Some of the buttons do the same jobs and you'll run along the occasional well-signposted wall, but mindless drones take the place of one-on-one standoffs against skilled opponents, and we're reminded of former Team Ninja boss Tomonobu Itagaki likening other beat 'em ups to chopping through a field of cabbages. Already there's more to *Z* than there ever was to *Lollipop Chainsaw*, but Yaiba is trading on a name that holds little weight with the broad audience *Z* is targeting and can only disappoint the faithful.



DESTINY

Publisher Activision **Developer** Bungie **Format** 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

Based on the gameplay sequence at E3, any fans who still believed Bungie had left Microsoft behind to remake *Halo* under a different banner ought to be relieved. The game Bungie is building seems much more enamoured with the class-based roleplaying of Dungeons & Dragons than it is with the framework of *Halo* and contemporary military shooters.

The amiable pomposity of *Destiny*'s naming conventions says it all. We see a boss emerge from a sewer whose name is Rixis, Archon Slayer. When killed, he drops a machine gun called the Thunderlord, which has its own upgrade tree. Guns are defined by stats: accuracy, stability, handling and mag size.

Warlock isn't just a cool-sounding name for what appears to be *Destiny*'s primary assault class. Unlike *Mass Effect*, which tried to rebrand its spells as biotic talents, *Destiny* seems less ashamed of its high-fantasy source texts. Players shoot lightning and other elements with a dramatic arm thrust.

After manoeuvring through a looming quarantine wall in a post-civilised corner of Earth called Old Russia, you reach what looks like a *Halo* combat bowl. Except things pivot into an instanced MMORPG-style set-piece against a tank called the Devil Walker. Several other Fireteams of real-world players join in the chaotic fun. Now this is how you sell always-online.



MIRROR'S EDGE 2

Publisher EA **Developer** DICE
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Kudos to EA for realising it had something special in *Mirror's Edge* despite the debut's uneven execution. In a world of gritty reboots, the gleaming white surfaces and vivid colour contrasts stand out, as does the bold choice of a female protagonist and the option of non-violent evasion. There's a huge amount of goodwill already banked with players. We have faith, in other words.



TRIALS FUSION/FRONTIER

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** RedLynx
Format 360, PS4, Xbox One/Vita **Release** TBA

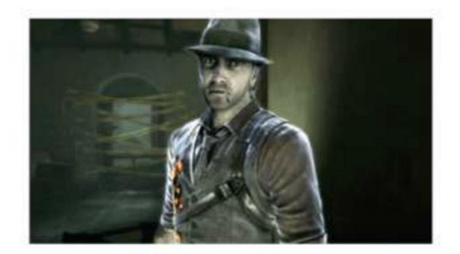
If it's a platform capable of playing games, RedLynx wants you to be able to faceplant off a motorbike at full throttle on it. Ubisoft announced at its E3 press briefing that *Trials* will be coming to next-gen platforms with *Trials Fusion* and to mobile devices in *Trials Frontier*. *Fusion* has added a score-chasing stunt mode and *Frontiers* sports new cartoony art, but the rest looks like masochistic business as usual.



SAINTS ROW IV

Publisher Deep Silver **Developer** Volition, Inc.
Format 360, PC, PS3 **Release** August

Casting players as a super-powered US president, *Saints Row IV*'s first playable demo presents us with the biggest choice of all: eradicate world hunger, or cure cancer? Press X to decide. Sure, you may be faster than a speeding train, and fire a dubstep gun that sees civilians spontaneously bust out dance moves, but this looks every inch the *Saints Row: The Third* expansion it once was, not a full sequel.



MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Airtight Games
Format 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2014

Most games end when your character dies. In this intriguing reworking of the detective thriller, Airtight's latest project begins with the death of your character. Since you were a detective in life, it only makes sense to investigate your death. Though you can't physically interact with objects, there are creative ways to puzzle your way through the case, possessing people and analysing clues.



LOST PLANET 3

Publisher Capcom **Developer** Spark Unlimited
Format 360, PC, PS3 **Release** August 30

The best E3 demos start with a bang and end with a preorder. Not this one. An obstruction makes leaping out of the mech we're piloting our first order of business, and what follows is a procession through icy facility corridors picking off scuttling Akrid, punctuated by three mechanically identical boss battles. *Lost Planet 3* has been delayed twice, but the extra months don't seem to have helped.



TRANSISTOR

Publisher TBA **Developer** Supergiant Games
Format PC, PS4 **Release** TBA

The biggest opportunity Supergiant has with *Transistor* is to create more varied gameplay to pair with its hallmark aesthetic. Female protagonist Red totes an imposing sword called Transistor, and this talking weapon has a lot more to offer than slicing and dicing. Switch from realtime action to planning mode and plot out a series of moves, then let them play out with lethal efficiency.



KINGDOM HEARTS 3

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** In-house
Format PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Square Enix producer Tetsuya Nomura admits *Kingdom Hearts III* is only in the preliminary stages of development, but wanted to confirm it at E3 in order to appease fans who've grown restless since the last main entry. This will be the first *Kingdom Hearts* to grace a Microsoft console and will beef up the action by having NPCs in each Disney-themed world spontaneously join in the fight.



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT

Publisher EA **Developer** DICE LA
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Nothing gets an auditorium of videogame fans hyperventilating quite like Star Wars. Well, perhaps one thing: the prospect of that universe rendered in DICE's Frostbite 3 engine. That's what E3 has teased with a trailer that appears to be set in the snowy wastes of Hoth if the ice and stomping AT-AT hoof are any indication. The closing of LucasArts could be an unexpected blessing after all.



FEZ 2

Publisher TBA **Developer** Polytron
Format TBA **Release** TBA

It speaks volumes about Phil Fish's history with console politics that he chose to announce the sequel for his beloved platformer *Fez* in a trailer reveal at the Horizon press conference, an indie-centric alternative to E3 held in the basement of LA's Museum Of Contemporary Art. Though no gameplay details have emerged, the trailer at least suggests Disasterpeace will be soundtracking *Fez 2*.



KILLER IS DEAD

Publisher Deep Silver/Xseed Games **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture
Format 360, PS3 **Release** August 27

Killer Is Dead's gameplay is a stark and simple counterpoint to its labyrinthine Suda 51 plotline – a story that takes hero Mondo Zappa around the world and to the dark side of the moon as he infiltrates bosses' strongholds and the pants of implausibly breasted women in a series of bloodbath swordfights and bizarre relationship sim minigames. All that really matters is this: one button punches, the other swings your sword, and it all handles very much like a colder, creepier *No More Heroes*. It's only the *Killer 7* successor Goichi Suda once hinted at in its sense of style; *Killer Is Dead* is funnier than his genre-defying horror shooter and takes far more joy in its violence. From the suited hero to the '60s soundtrack, *Killer Is Dead* is every bit Suda's version of a James Bond pastiche, with a sword replacing the PPK and no change whatsoever to the constant innuendo.



DISNEY INFINITY

Publisher Disney Interactive **Developer** Avalanche Software
Format 360, PS3, Wii, Wii U **Release** August 18 (US), 23 (EU)

When Disney announced its intentions to borrow the *Skylanders* template and wrap that hybrid of physical toys and software around the company's stable of IP, our thoughts went out to the parents with young children who will soon need to take out a second mortgage to cope. Not only will Disney be selling starter and play set packs for its various franchises, it's also offering blind packs with supplementary power discs, which provide buffs to your characters or additional content for the game's creative Toybox mode. Some of these discs will be exceedingly rare just to ensure that kids feel compelled to try this child-friendly form of gambling. Unlike *Skylanders*, though, *Disney Infinity* characters seem to have more to do than simply battle, such as the Lone Ranger rounding up horses, or the Monsters University crew practising their scare tactics.



WATCH DOGS

Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** In-house (Montreal) **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November

Watch Dogs stole the show at E3 2012, but this year it had competition. Even so, it held its own. Our demo gave us a first look at life off-mission on the streets of Chicago, and told us much about how Ubisoft is stitching together so mechanically diverse a game. Being able to hack into almost anything with a microchip is a challenge from which many others emerge. Hacking requires stealth, which in turn needs several means of escape: driving, shooting, and running away.

Binding it all together is a reputation system. Prevent a crime – gaining advance warning using a profiling app that gives you insight into citizens' medical and criminal history, and lifestyle choices – and your reputation increases. Run over a pedestrian and it goes down. When we visit a gun store with negative rep, the owner tips off the police by silent alarm.

You need to hack security stations before compromising other local systems. Only then can you hack a Wi-Fi hotspot and follow a chain of routers into an apartment building, using a laptop webcam to find a mobile phone containing a family's banking details to steal. There's multiplayer, too, with a *Dark Souls*-style invasion system that has no tangible impact but drives a metagame of building a network of hacked foes, which serves as a kind of realtime leaderboard.



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Publisher Bethesda **Developer** Zenimax Online
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Spring 2014

Zenimax Online Studios' MMOG ignores many of the orthodoxies of its genre, sloughing off stat screens and roll-based combat in favour of the stripped-back approach typical of the singleplayer games. Now we know why: *The Elder Scrolls Online* will see release on Xbox One and PS4 in 2014. It remains to be seen, however, whether console audiences will accept the fetch quests and phasing that come with the MMOG legacy. The necessities of creating a multiplayer game mean that this latest take on Tamriel is broader than it is deep. Expect to be channelled into a combat-centric role. The game will struggle to explain itself to players who see *Skyrim* as last-gen, but it's innovative enough in its own right to find fans, particularly on PC, where its promise of firstperson, 500-man PvP combat is likely to appeal most.

THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

Publisher CD Projekt Red **Developer** In-house
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

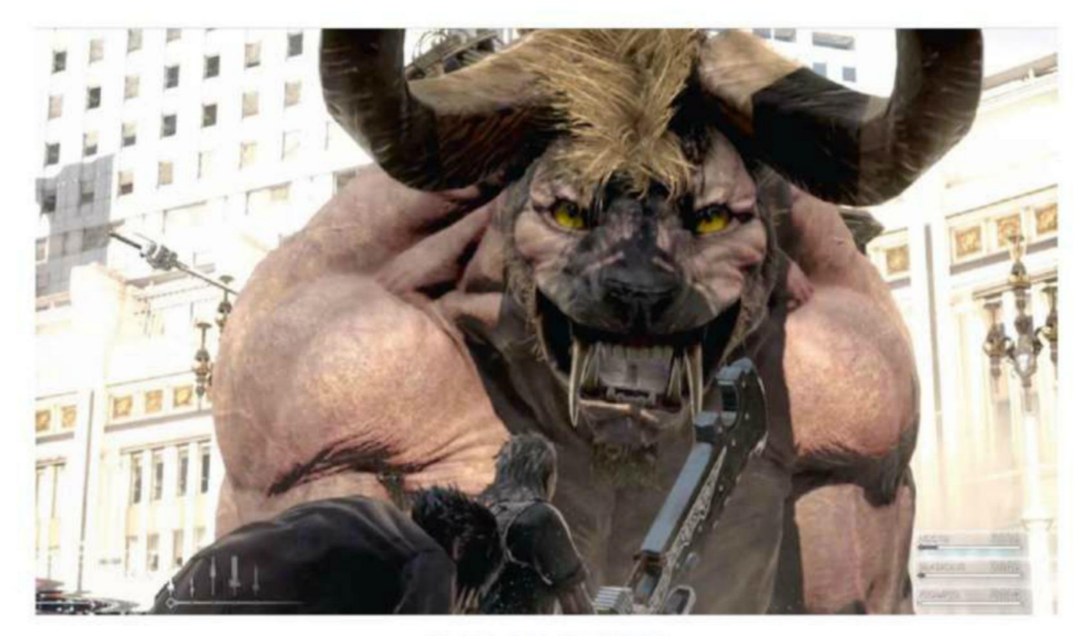
CD Projekt does love its shades of narrative grey. In the new E3 demo, Geralt is asked to kill a Leshen, a forest-dwelling beast that's been slaying residents of a village. Once our hero returns from a successful hunt, he finds the local youth have killed off their elders, too, believing them to have been colluding with the monster. Such actions can have unexpected consequences that ripple out into the world: when Geralt returns later in the game, he'll find the village has descended into chaos. E3 also brought new information on the story, specifically that the Wild Hunt – a group of spectral horsemen of European myth, believed to precede some cataclysmic event – are the principal antagonists. They return after thousands of years to conquer a world divided by warring kings, inching this closer to the playable Game Of Thrones of our dreams.



CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

Publisher Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 5

Modern Warfare's Pripyat mission was the best and worst thing to happen to *Call Of Duty*. The stealth-by-numbers interlude that was once so powerful has since become the norm, appearing in every *Modern Warfare*, every *Black Ops* and three times in *Ghosts*. While the scenery changes, the beats remain the same. In No Man's Land, you'll sneak through a small settlement just north of San Diego using your dog, Reilly, as an insta-kill stealth drone; in Federation Day, you'll abseil down a Venezuelan skyscraper, picking off enemy soldiers through the windows. In Into The Deep, you'll hide among sunken ships in the Caribbean in pursuit of a battleship. No Man's Land begins with a speaker-rattling explosion, Federation Day and Into The Deep end with one, and all the while you're reminded of Pripyat, when these beats felt new.



FINAL FANTASY XV

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** In-house **Format** PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Though it was the deeply broken *Final Fantasy XIV Online* that eventually drew a mea culpa from ex-Square Enix CEO Yoichi Wada, the series has committed a host of design sins in recent years that have gone unconfessed. But fans aren't interested in apologies, they just want *Final Fantasy* to be good again. The gameplay footage of *FFXV* that Square Enix unveiled at E3 offers reasons to hope. We see Noctis and two compatriots battling horned behemoths beneath looming skyscrapers. Attacks unspool in fluid chains, and Noctis can close distances in seconds using a new warping ability. He also appears to be able to parry the sword attacks of a huge enemy knight.

The visuals in *FFXV* are astounding, which shouldn't come as a surprise, since it was Square's own Luminous tech demo that helped crystallise in our minds what graphical benchmarks were possible on next-gen hardware. The spires of Gothic architecture reach into the sky, which is filled with levitating airships. Another scene shows Noctis sprinting across the surface of an aircraft while a colossal leviathan writhes in the ocean below. For many, the idea of the playable cutscene is still the next-gen dream and *Final Fantasy*'s gradual move from static turn-based combat to increasingly realtime encounters has been one of the series' defining evolutionary strands.



MAD MAX

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** Avalanche Studios **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

This wasn't quite E3 2013's worst-kept secret – that honour went to *Dead Rising 3* – but Avalanche has been rumoured to be working on a Mad Max game for years. With a fourth Mad Max film in production, E3 was the logical time for Avalanche to pull back the curtain on its first next-gen game. And it's beautiful – as beautiful as a barren post-apocalyptic Wasteland can be. This isn't all-new tech, but the next-gen version of the Avalanche Engine that powered *Just Cause 2*, something that's made clear when you see its explosions.

Max has a mutant companion named Chumbucket, but his real best friend is a vehicle. Unlike other open-world games, here you'll stick with one car, upgrading it to better deal with combat on the open road. If it takes too much damage, Chumbucket will fix 'er up for you. There's a pleasingly weighty physics system underpinning the car, both in battle and as the suspension bobs you up and down over the Wasteland's varied terrain, kicking up clouds of dust as you go. Combat involves an arsenal of weaponry to use at range and hand-to-hand fisticuffs up close. The mechanics we're most intrigued by are the three words in the top-left corner of the screen: Eat, Drink and Rest. These suggest that scavenging for supplies and respecting the day-night cycle will be of greater significance than in the pseudo-survivalist likes of *Tomb Raider*.



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

Publisher EA **Developer** BioWare
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

It's savvy on BioWare's part to drop the sequential numbering from its high-fantasy series, especially given the risks of *Dragon Age III* calling to mind *DAII*, a misstep guilty of extensively recycling locations. *Inquisition* should remedy that concern, offering a sprawling, more varied landmass, one that's four to five times larger than the Ferelden of the original. Despite richly branching narratives, the geographical progression of past games remained mostly linear, so *Inquisition* aims to create a more open framework. The reveal trailer shows an epic war underway that's embroiled every faction in the universe, so it makes sense to let the world breathe and have that struggle play out across a much less segmented environment. Also to thank is the influence of *Skyrim*, which BioWare admits it has been studying with interest.



THE EVIL WITHIN

Publisher Bethesda **Developer** Tango Gameworks
Format PC, PS3, PS4, 360, Xbox One **Release** 2014

Shinji Mikami's return to survival horror at first seems of a piece with his earlier work in the genre. *The Evil Within* opens with a single-location setup reminiscent of the first *Resident Evil*: an asylum overrun with supernatural terrors through which the player flees, using stealth, hiding in lockers, and relying on distraction to evade monsters. That claustrophobic first impression is a bit of sleight of hand, however: The *Evil Within*'s scope is much greater. A later sequence suggests something closer to *Resident Evil 4*, featuring open-ended combat where the player uses the environment to control a horde of zombies despite a scarcity of ammunition. This then transitions seamlessly into the next linear sequence of scares. How successfully the game balances these shifts between different types of horror will be the measure of *The Evil Within*.



R O B O T

PlayJam's portable GameStick console wants to



W A R S

lead the Android invasion of our living rooms





ameStick is part of the vanguard of the crowdfunded microconsole movement, and the challenge for any would-be platform holder now is how to differentiate your product from the rest. For PlayJam, a UK-based company that made its name and its millions creating casual games for smart TVs, its console's USP is volume. Not in terms of production run – just 80,000 will be manufactured initially, the majority destined to fulfil the orders of the system's Kickstarter backers – but the space it occupies. GameStick is a dongle-sized console that plugs into your TV via HDMI, runs Android games, and can be carried around in your pocket.

Fashioned in conjunction with an unnamed product design company, it may not match Apple's line for sleek mainstream desirability, but it holds its own next to the broader console crowd. But looks are largely irrelevant to a home system's success, and the more pressing question is whether the ease of transporting consoles is a problem that needs solving. In this age of expansive widescreen sets, televisions are as inert as the boxes beneath them. And with the ubiquity of Android-based smartphones, which already act as portable gaming systems, why do we need a TV-tethered plug-in console?

Anthony Johnson, PlayJam's chief marketing officer, is certain there is a need for GameStick. "I think there's a huge market for this product," he says. "You can't carry around a plasma TV with you, but generally there's a TV most places you go. Imagine you're travelling on holiday, [and] your kids want to bring a videogame console with them. You don't want to lug an Xbox One to your hotel. GameStick solves the problem, slipping imperceptibly into a bag or rucksack. Or for people reluctantly visiting their mother-in-law who want some entertainment to make the stay more bearable, GameStick is ideal. We believe there's an appetite for a portable big-screen gaming solution."

Johnson's argument doesn't pinpoint an audience, but it does seem more convincing when you consider PlayJam's Kickstarter success. The company first touted the idea of the portable microconsole on the crowdfunding site in January, passed its funding target of $100,000 in just 30 hours, and went on to exceed its goal by almost $550,000. Backers were offered a console for a $69 investment (the machine will retail at $79, or £80, and is out in the UK in August), which means the average spend on GameStick per backer was over double that of the Kickstarter average. At the very least, such figures indicate there are those willing to actively support alternatives to the current console status quo. But whether the project can find mass appeal beyond the highly engaged Internet funding crowd is much less certain, especially when it's so unclear exactly who PlayJam hopes GameStick will appeal to.

The system's financial backers include a number of tech-savvy Android fans, of course, but this group could well be alienated by PlayJam's decision to create its own bespoke online store. GameStick, according to Johnson, has the capacity to comfortably play "every videogame so far released on the Google Play Store", but the current setup will require games to be specifically ported to the console, and players will need to repurchase games they already own in the Android ecosystem for their GameStick. Meanwhile, the lack of big-name exclusives for launch removes one incentive for gamers to pick up the microconsole if they already have devices that suit their needs.



Anthony Johnson, PlayJam's chief marketing officer

THE SPECS

CPU Amlogic 8726-MXS
Memory 1GB DDR3, 8GB Flash
Wi-Fi 802.11 b/g/n
Bluetooth LE 4.0
OS Android 4.2 Jelly Bean
Memory 8GB internal, 32GB Micro SD slot on GameStick, 64GB Micro SD slot on Dock
Controller Bluetooth 3.0 controller; USB support via Dock

"HAVING A DEGREE OF NAÏVETY HAS HELPED US ACHIEVE A LOT MORE THAN A COMPANY WITH A LOT OF EXPERIENCE IN HARDWARE"

But while there is a barrier to entry for game developers, Johnson is eager to stress how straightforward porting existing games to GameStick can be. "Traditionally, to get your game on TV, you have to go through console makers, which is prohibitively expensive. What we're saying is: 'Here's full access; you can publish your games very quickly onto TV.' We even had one developer turn up to our GameStick booth at a conference, get his laptop out, download our SDK, and within an hour he had his game ported to GameStick."

The majority of Android games have been designed specifically for touchscreen phones, though, so isn't Johnson's optimism misplaced? "Ease of porting really depends on the game," he admits. "You're right, some mobile games won't translate to game pad. But we have a solution for that: a remote control application that players can download to a phone or tablet in order to turn it into a controller." Even so, Johnson is quick to point out that this type of game should be the exception rather than the rule when the system is up and running: "Ultimately we are going for proper controller games."

Unlike GameStick, the controller itself is surprisingly backward looking in design, a squat, chunky slab of plastic that takes its input prompts from both Wii's Classic Controller and the SNES pad. While the early, hand-assembled version we are given to use is creaky enough to be concerning, PlayJam assures us that the final product will be made to high standards. Even so, the pad lacks the comfort and elegant form factor of current mainstream consoles' controller designs. It certainly contributes to the general sense that this is a budget product, not a premium one.

PlayJam's inexperience in building hardware may well also be a factor, although Johnson chooses to see that as a positive. "Having a degree of naïvety has helped us achieve a lot more than a company with a lot of experience in hardware manufacturing. They might think you couldn't shrink something to this size. Even some of the chip manufacturers we work with had their doubts. But we pushed it and pushed it, since we didn't have anything to lose, and I think that contributed to the size and neatness of the final product."

The company also leaned heavily on GameStick's backers for help in finalising the system's design and hardware features. "For example, there was a concern from backers over memory capacity, so we added an SD slot. And while there was a positive response





GameStick's storefront is uncluttered right now, and Johnson assures us that discoverability issues down the line will be countered by computational promotion systems without bias



PLAYJAM BOASTS THAT MORE THAN 5,000 DEVELOPERS ARE SIGNED UP TO ITS DEVELOPER PROGRAMME, WITH 1,000 ACTIVELY ENGAGED





Madfinger shooter *Shadowgun* (above) and *Smash Cops*, Hutch's debut battle racer, come preloaded on GameStick

to the idea that this is a console primarily for playing videogames, people asked about including media centre functionality, and the ability to add a keyboard and mouse to the 'Stick. So in just 24 hours, we turned around a solution we've termed the Dock."

The Dock is an optional piece of hardware into which GameStick slots. It features three USB ports for various types of peripheral hardware – including, potentially, microphones and dance mats – and allows you to power the 'Stick from within, creating a piece of hardware that looks more like a set-top box, though this comes at the expense of being able to drop the system into a pocket. The unit doubles as a wireless charger for the control pad, too. Finally, the Dock expands the memory capacity of the device, allowing for a 64GB SD memory card to be added. This brings GameStick's potential capacity up to 104GB, one clear advantage it has over Android-based mobile phones.

GameStick's story mirrors that of Ouya, another crowdfunded Android-based console slated for release this summer, albeit one that's arguably more clear on its target audience. The two systems share many similarities, but **Bruce Grove**, general manager of cloud-based Android game service OnLive, believes there's more than enough room for both. "The market for connected Android devices has barely begun," he says. "If you start from the assumption that all users have identical needs, then you might conclude that the market isn't developed enough for two of these devices. But if you look at the potential number of users out there who don't yet have a game device attached to their TVs, then the perspective is quite different. We know a huge number of people play games on mobile devices that don't necessarily play on consoles. What attracts them to these games? Ease of entry, social [features] and convenience, low cost of entry – all of these are areas GameStick can address, potentially reaching a whole new audience."

With many games moving from touchscreen controls to a control pad, maintaining a high level of quality assurance will be crucial to GameStick's early success. Much like Apple, PlayJam has a quality assurance team to check through new games deployed to GameStick's servers before they're pushed live to players. Games that fail the criteria of this process will be rejected and sent back to the developer for fixing. PlayJam will also follow Apple's lead with store presentation, and the way in which people discover games. "We are not reinventing how people search for content," says Johnson. "But it's all about us engaging off-platform as much as on-platform. We want to build a community around GameStick and to communicate with that community about new games. The application won't just be a game controller – [we will] have a news section, a featured section and an entire editorial piece behind what we do."

While developers who publish their title on GameStick early will likely have a good shot at that all-important front-page positioning, once the digital game store grows in size and larger publishers descend, there is the ongoing issue of discoverability to address. It's a criticism that continues to be levelled at the App Store, and stands to hurt indies the most, which is antithetical to the open ethos GameStick's Kickstarter campaign was built upon. Johnson is confident that PlayJam's system will be fair. "We have genuine [algorithmic] systems behind the scenes to show what's popular, what's hot, what's new and so on," he explains. "We won't manipulate those in any way. We will have paid-for placement at some point, but I don't know when. And we might create a sandbox area that will allow people to demo games to help generate awareness of those games before they publish. More than anything will be [the] editorial approach to off-platform work that will promote the games."

Games are central to the success of any new console hardware, even a budget system that's positioned for impulse buying. PlayJam boasts that more than 5,000 developers are signed up to its developer programme, with 1,000 actively engaged. The team estimates that the system will host over 100 titles at launch, although most, if not all, of these are ports of existing Android titles. It's a serious issue for the new system: there are no marquee titles to sell it to engaged gamers on launch day, and there's uncertainty over how quickly new titles will get ported across. It leaves the console competing on cost and portability, rather than games.



Ouya is GameStick's biggest rival in bringing Android to the living room, having raised $8.5million on Kickstarter back in August 2012. It will be out by the time you read this



CONSOLE ETHICS

PlayJam claims it spent considerable time and energy on ensuring the GameStick is ethically manufactured, with members of the team touring various Chinese factories to, as Johnson puts it, "ensure they were up to the quality and standard we required, but also could deliver from an ethical standpoint". The team saw some "pretty awful" places on its tour before settling on a couple of key manufacturers that were recommended to PlayJam by partners.

PlayJam's hope is that more developers will begin to create larger, more technologically demanding Android titles to make full use of the hardware and bigger screens. "As devs start to build games specifically for TV, our hardware will reflect that," says Johnson, indicating that PlayJam intends for GameStick to be refined over time. "We have a hardware road map to ensure that future iterations support the new games we expect. In terms of design, we have some ideas but nothing is decided. It will always involve taking what we have today and make sure [our] processing power can support the full range of Android games."

Unusually for a Kickstarter-funded piece of hardware, GameStick will launch in retail stores, not just online. Here PlayJam has another advantage over its competitors: US retail chain GameStop has a stake in the company. "We are fortunate with that," Johnson admits. "GameStick is already available for preorder in Game and GameStop, and thanks to the Dock, we have a range of products available right from launch." This kind of fortuitous collaboration is exactly how GameStick has managed to move from sketch to reality in such a short space of time. "We're lucky to have great support across the board: GameStop, AM Logic, the British chipset guys at ARM. Some of our team are ex-Sega."

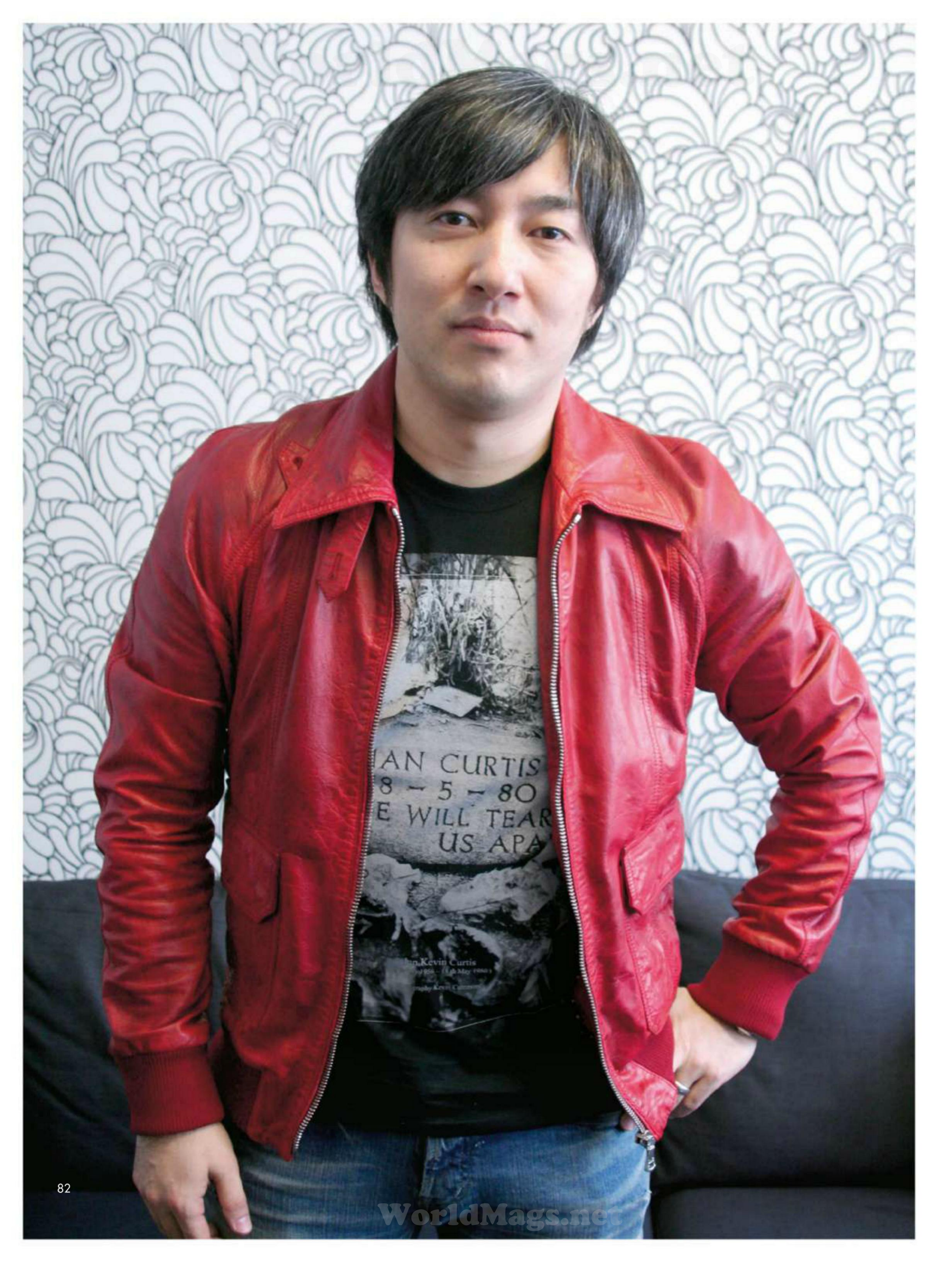
PlayJam's future plans for GameStick also draw from its experience with set-top box providers, and display its broader ambitions, which may lie away from the system itself. "As well as the hardware, we've also made a strong back-end platform. This means we can take the GameStick library and potentially export back into any other device. For example, Verizon or Sky may want to add a videogame solution to their hardware. We can do that easily, licensing what we have into any manufacturer's product. Not only is that attractive to developers, since they can potentially reach entirely new audiences, but also something like that will accelerate the market."





Rest the GameStick controller on top of the Dock and it will charge wirelessly, which is an unexpectedly expensive-sounding feature for a budget console. It also has an Ethernet port, three USB ports (two on the rear) and an SD card slot. The Dock costs an additional $40 (£35)

Market acceleration will be, PlayJam hopes, a key effect of GameStick's arrival, disrupting the status quo, and offering players a cheap and simple alternative to the heavyweight, expensive traditional consoles. But in choosing to fight on the unproven selling points of a TV-tethered console's size and portability, GameStick's risks are significant – and they're spread largely across its Internet backers. ■


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AN AUDIENCE WITH…

GOICHI SUDA

Killer Is Dead's creator talks about originality, videogame sexism and why engines are more important than hardware

Over 20 years in the game industry, **Goichi Suda**, AKA Suda 51, has defined his career with original and often absurd design. An early role as a scenario writer at Human Entertainment saw him strike *Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special*'s player character with a bout of depression, motivating the character to commit suicide in the final act. Suda's other protagonists have all found themselves subject to character traits and personality flaws uncommon in games, and defined by exaggerated eccentricities. *No More Heroes*' Travis Touchdown was an otaku manchild and 11th-best killer in the world, while *Lollipop Chainsaw*'s Juliet Starling was a softcore fantasy cheerleader with quirks enough to spawn a thousand cosplay imitators. Suda's next title, *Killer Is Dead*, stars Mondo Zappa, his take on James Bond: a conduit to explore sex, violence and dysfunctional personalities from another angle. Suda does so via a series of bloodbath swordfights and relationship minigames where Mondo attempts to charm the game's female cast. We talk to the Grasshopper chief about his defiance of industry standards, next-generation consoles and *Killer Is Dead*'s Gigolo mode.

Your games have always been unlike others on the market. Why do you place such value on uniqueness?
So I think videogames are becoming an important, and a dominant, form of entertainment worldwide. And in that landscape, I truly feel that our shooters, racers and our mainstream games have been covered, checked off and done well. To really push games into the realm of culture and art, I feel that only doing realistic mainstream games won't be enough; we need to pursue new frontiers and new horizons with what we do, and the process of creation shouldn't be contained. Therefore, I feel at Grasshopper one of our obligations – our duties – to the videogame world is to create revolutionary titles that really push the status quo.

While you've worked on everything from RPGs to survival horror, you keep returning to action games.
I most enjoy playing action games. I prefer them, regardless of their size, budget and where [they're] made, and I have a special attachment to sidescrolling action games; I guess it's because the retro, arcadey type of games remind me of my childhood. I get inspired by movies, comic books, novels and others as well as videogames, but I often get the foundation of my ideas from contemporary art.

Can you be as free with your own influences when working on other people's properties, such as *Project Zero* or *Samurai Champloo*?
When I work with someone's property, such as existing animes, I need to take a completely different stance from working on my own. I need to have the utmost respect for the original creator and investigate who the fans are, because they may be different to our own. I need to be very analytical at all times, but by doing so I can judge whether something unique is required or not, and you take control of your ideas this way. I pay a lot of attention to the original work, but still try to make something original.

As we approach the end of a console generation, it's growing increasingly difficult to sell anything besides the biggest of blockbusters. Do you feel that originality is something consumers are interested in rewarding?
I agree, right now the environment kind of demands and desires standardised games. And what we at Grasshopper need to pursue is pushing the status quo, but also still cater to our fans and our community, our customers, because

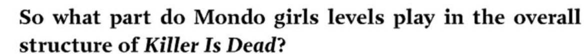
they are the ones who are going to ultimately end up supporting us. Our community is already so strong, and by reaching out to them we can reach out to more [people and] expand upon the community that we've created to help raise the level of enlightenment, so to speak.

Do you think there's a danger that *Killer Is Dead*'s Gigolo levels will alienate female players?
I'm actually not that concerned, because I think women can have just as much fun with that mode; that's certainly the case in Japan anyway. I don't know about North America or Europe. We haven't done any focus tests for this mode specifically, but I did have the publishers – both European and North American, Deep Silver and Xseed – give us their feedback on the mode, and give us what they thought was wrong. And they also seemed to feel that it's a mode that would be palatable for audiences local to Europe and North America. I'm not as concerned as you might think.



CV

A former undertaker, Goichi Suda is CEO of Tokyo studio Grasshopper Manufacture. He got his break at Human Entertainment, where he worked on two *Fire Pro Wrestling* games for Nintendo's Super Famicom before moving to Japan-only PlayStation horror series *Syndrome*. Grasshopper has produced over 20 games in its 15 years in business.



So what part do Mondo girls levels play in the overall structure of *Killer Is Dead*?
So taking into consideration that this a very fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping action game, we needed there to be some moments of rest where Mondo will take a step back from all the killing and kind of relax and unwind. Originally, I wanted to include the Gigolo mode in *Shadows Of The Damned*, but it didn't quite make it into the final cut, so I've kind of reinstated that mode here. *Killer Is Dead* offered the perfect platform to do that.

There's an ongoing debate regarding the depiction of women in games. You see that encouraging players to ogle women via X-ray specs will be controversial, right?
We try to create a world that doesn't really trace or depict what is considered 'real', but what I like to consider a 'hyper-real' world. And when you take examples in other pop-culture media... James Bond, especially, which is a big inspiration for Mondo girls – 'Mondo girl' is a play on the Japanese pronunciation of Bond girl, in fact. James Bond, after he does a mission, there's always going to be a Bond girl who will, in between, offer him a moment of relief and relaxation. So I'm depicting something similar here, and I feel that the implementation of it will give the players a kind of beat, a type of rest.

Of course, the role of Bond girls is often debated, too, and the way such characters are depicted in the films has evolved over time...
It's not that we depict the women in any derogatory way, so I'm not extremely concerned about the depiction of these characters. I think if you play this mode for yourself, [then] you will be able to understand the context. There is punishment if Mondo tries to do anything that crosses the line with these women, too, so he could very well get slapped if he does anything that would be considered not classy or uncool. I think there's a proper amount of punishment and reward.

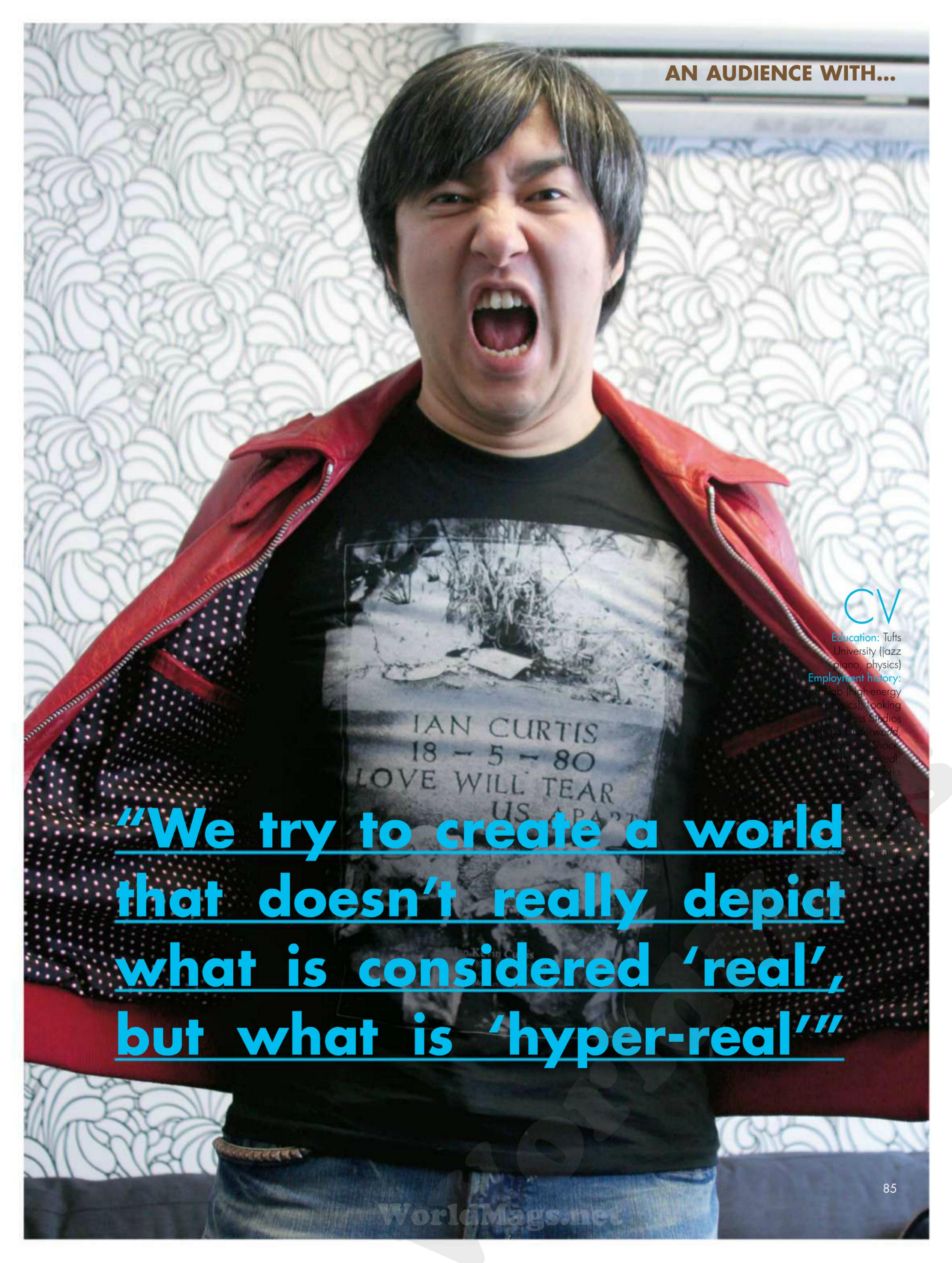
Why do so few game developers consider sexuality as a defining character trait, and why is it such an important trait for so many of your protagonists?
I don't pay attention to sexuality at all, but when I write I think about how I can create an attractive protagonist, rather than just creating a character. The fact that each of my characters breathes and lives in his or her world may be the reason they are seen to have sexuality as a trait. I especially love drama showing human lives. In videogames, having a good depiction of human beings is always important to me, and [that] has never changed...

You managed to sell Juliet Starling from *Lollipop Chainsaw* in a market largely indifferent to female protagonists and original brands. Is your method of character creation responsible, do you think?
All of us at Grasshopper, Warner Bros and Kadokawa Games worked together to make Juliet a star in the game industry. We needed to show the players how attractive she was, so we put her at the centre of all our marketing, showing her battles against zombies using her chainsaw and her acrobatic movement, and we showed she was a strong and capable girl. I also believe having Jessica Nigri, a charismatic cosplayer, helped a great deal to make Juliet appealing to gamers by putting a real face to the character.

Could you imagine yourself making a game with a female protagonist who isn't overwhelmingly sexy?
Yes, I can imagine and I can create her. We would need to work hard to get the recognition from many gamers.

What will define the next generation for Grasshopper?
I feel like the two consoles are really converging on a single point almost. Whether it's hardware spec-wise or in the firstparties' philosophies, we're really seeing these consoles become an avenue into your living room. And in doing so, what I really want to push and emphasise at Grasshopper is not which platform we choose, but which kind of engine we choose. We're developing on Unreal 3 for *Killer Is Dead*, but moving forward this is probably the last Unreal 3 game we'll develop before we explore Unreal 4 and a variety of other engines, and see which will allow us to do what we want.

Do either of the two new platforms offer you a specific advantage for the games you want to make?
I wouldn't really want to restrict ourselves to a single platform, and of course the engines will have support for multiple platforms... I feel there's a sort of desire from players to see games on multiple platforms, in a variety of packages, in a variety of different forms. So we really want to tax the engines in this next generation. The platforms will be pulled along by the engines, I want to say. ■



"We try to create a world that doesn't really depict what is considered 'real', but what is 'hyper-real'"

CV

Education: Tufts University (jazz piano, physics)
Employment history: Fermilab (high-energy physics); Looking Glass Studios (*Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock*, *Flight Unlimited*); Dreamworks Interactive (*Jurassic Park: Trespasser*); Microsoft (DirectX, Xbox hardware); Entertainment Group; Creative Artists Agency



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Mirror's Edge 360, PC, PS3
DICE's confirmation that it's working on a new open-world *Mirror's Edge* sent us scurrying back to the ambitious but messy original to brush up on our parkour skills. It might have fallen apart soon after its memorable opening, but that can't diminish the breezy sensation of freedom the game bestows. And irrespective of the appeal of its reboot's 1080p visuals, the original's stark aesthetic has lost none of its lustre.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown 360, iOS, PC, PS3
What alien science did Firaxis have to steal to allow us to play this magnificent reboot on our iDevices? Either way, this port has done the rounds at **Edge** HQ, plunging us back into the world of intense tactical engagements and splattering Sectoids. This time, we've also found a use for SHIVs, placing the hover version as a floating distraction and eye-in-the-sky Overwatch turret to cover ground advances.

Spelunky 360, PC
Each special objective you're required to tick off in order to reach *Spelunky*'s City Of Gold feels like a game of connect the dots. Only this constellation of dots happens to be perpetually in flux, since the procedurally generated level layouts reshuffle each round. On a whim, we decided to make a six-second Vine video of our little Viking achieving each one. The result is a timelapse tease, showing all the triumphant milestones and none of the setbacks.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



www.edge-online.com
Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

It's not about quantity, but about time well spent

Infinite seconds are on the clock, and yet the end is nigh. Just two wrong moves would be enough to end the game, so we decide to take our time. This is *Stickets* (p105), a minimalist puzzler that can be over in an instant, yet one that has absorbed the **Edge** team for ages. It is the very antithesis of the 'more is more' mentality that many developers apply to the triple-A market. If one of something – cars, guns, missions, playable characters, explosions – is good, then ten is ten times better, right?

That kind of thinking seems to have been applied to Relic's new RTS juggernaut, *Company Of Heroes 2* (p88), in places. Depicting the vast sweep of the Eastern Front is not a task that could be achieved in a few short hours, but its efforts to meld too many slavishly thematic scenarios and a wending story with this most massive of conflicts have conspired to leave the game struggling under the weight of a bloated singleplayer campaign. In providing a deluge of superfluous mission objectives, it has only watered down the intensity of the superlative original.



Plants Vs Zombies 2: It's About Time (p92), meanwhile, is also generously proportioned, but comes bulging with a raft of smart additions to the formula. It may have adopted the free-to-play model, but defies the timewaster label by never wasting your time. Where most of its peers are happy to offer quicker progress in exchange for a steady stream of pennies, PopCap seems much less interested in your loose change than in your enjoyment.

Each of these games is an argument for how best to captivate players, and the inherent value of your downtime. Perhaps what they end up implying most, however, is that true generosity is not merely a shedload of content, but making sure our gaming moments are never misspent.

Company Of Heroes 2

There's a war raging in *Company Of Heroes 2*, and it's not the one you're thinking of. Entrenched on one side is developer Relic's desire to tackle the hardships and tactics of WWII's Eastern Front. On the other is a well-oiled war machine comprised of components taken from the best RTS of 2006, whose innovative technology and nuanced strategic options revitalised a then staid setting, and whose qualities continue to hold up seven years on.

Across *COH2*'s three separate modes – a story-driven singleplayer campaign, the expansive multiplayer and the Theatre Of War challenges that draw ideas from both – the battle lines shift and reform. But it's the singleplayer game that suffers the most collateral damage. The first cutscenes introduce you to Lev Abramovich Isakovich, a former Soviet officer locked up in a gulag in 1952 after losing his faith in the cause. He's being questioned by his ex-commander, causing him to relive memories of engagements from the attack on Stalingrad to attempting to break the Leningrad blockade. These scenes are played earnestly, full of cliché-ridden contretemps, and drenched in accents as thick and convincingly Russian as black treacle.

Each exchange is merely an excuse to cut to scenes from the Eastern Front. Here, Relic seems intent on emphasising the horrors of war, but does so with little exploration of the impact of the events depicted. You'll see the infamous Order 227 enacted when a Commissar instructs a machine gunner to mow down retreating comrades. The gunner opens fire without question or visible turmoil. Then a quick cut and you're away to the next scene. You can almost hear the pen scratching a tick in the 'Order 227' box on Relic's checklist.

The framing of scenarios through Isakovich's jaded eyes implies judgement on them, but the grandiose presentation and weak script (everything is done for the Motherland, everyone's a comrade) can make it seem uneasily like glorification. Conspicuous by their absence are many of the human-rights violations the troops committed, or a full examination of the living conditions they endured. Relic seemingly wants to tell a hard-hitting story, but it's tough to deliver powerful blows if you won't take off your heavy, fur-lined gloves.

The story, tonally unpleasant guff as it is, wouldn't be such a problem if it wasn't leading up to perpetrating these acts yourself. But it seems unwise to pass comment on the practices of the Red Army and then weave them into the missions. This goes double when they come at the expense of enjoyment. The first three of the campaign's multipart levels, for instance, focus on Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht push into Soviet territory. This translates into a lot of doomed defence operations across multiple fronts, forced retreats and enacting Stalin's scorched earth policy as a pair of mission objectives, one of which is burning a few houses to the ground. These are emotionally pyrrhic early victories, more sapping than rewarding.

Publisher Sega
Developer Relic Entertainment
Format PC
Release Out now

Battling snipers across city ruins is memorable, forcing you to consider your approach and to mistrust the open air



Things pick up soon after, when Relic allows its proven systems to shine again. It may take newcomers a while to get used to *Company Of Heroes'* trademark brand of hyperkinetic squad micromanagement, but the interlocking web of unit abilities is as potent and enjoyable as ever. With practice, you can orchestrate cerebral moves, such as using scout snipers with hold-fire orders to send up flares, illuminating troops within the TrueSight fog of war for mortar crews to scatter, then freeing the snipers to mop up any stragglers.

Emplaced weapons are another returning signature of the series, with distinct firing arcs and setup times meaning they require precise placement to be effective. And heavy weapons don't just whittle down a health bar faster – they'll cow and pin troops, devastating squads foolish enough to come within range. What's more, infantry can occupy many of the maps' intricately destructible buildings, affording units inside greater protection and line of sight at the cost of mobility.

So the campaign's 14 missions are of uneven quality, but there are flashes of greatness. Hunting a powerful Tiger tank with limited resources and a handful of infantry squads is fantastically tense, asking you to gather anti-tank rifles and mobile AT guns under constant threat until you have enough firepower to turn the tables. Battling snipers across a ruined city is another memorable moment, forcing you to consider your approach and to mistrust the open air. Such missions remind us why we love this series so much, as Relic's audio team deafens us with mortar fire and our minds race to solve the problems its mission designers pose. For every such gem, however, there's another base defence mission or drawn-out tussle to undermine it. This is a campaign that will last you a good 12 hours, but would be so much tighter if its more repetitious sections had been cut – perhaps a sign of *COH2*'s publisher troubles, which saw it move from THQ's command to Sega's during development.

Another problem that afflicts too many missions can be traced back to Relic's misguided desire to stick to its theme: conscript squads are plentiful and easily called via a shortcut icon, but there are disappointingly few engagements that can't be rendered trivial with sheer manpower. Meat grinding is a valid tactic and suits the nature of this conflict, but it rapidly sucks the fun out of *COH*'s interaction-intense nature. Part of the issue is that the camera can't zoom out wide enough to make handling lots of troops effortless. The minimap helps, as do certain keyboard shortcuts, but it chafes after the freedom offered by the likes of *Supreme Commander*.

Multiplayer avoids many of the campaign's excesses, and is far better for it. Following in the footsteps of the

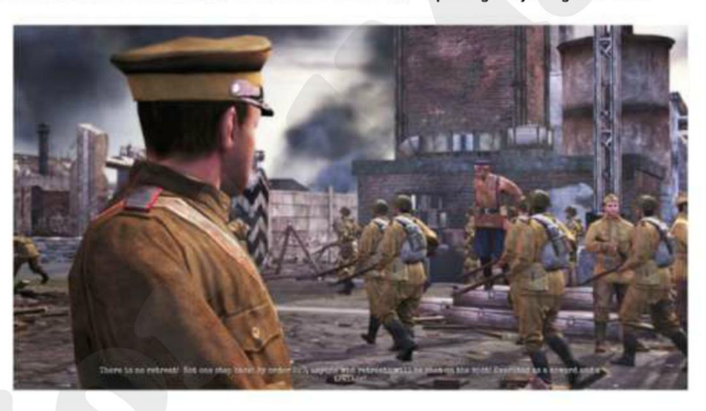
ABOVE It's easy to forget just how transformative firing arcs are in an RTS, but they turn *Company Of Heroes* into a battle of wits as well as one of progressively bigger weapons. Also, nearly every unit has a counter to keep it in check. **LEFT** Tanks are distressingly, if inconsistently, eager to rush towards the enemy and sit trading shots at near point-blank range. It's frustrating when they expose their weak sides, since they're such a considerable resource investment



BELOW Officers in the Red Army are generally portrayed as scumbags, only too eager to have their men rounded up and shot. Shortly after each scene, you get the dubious privilege of joining their ranks



ABOVE Most infantry weapons have little hope of penetrating a tank's hide, but that won't stop your men trying. It's immensely satisfying when you do make good use of infantry abilities to take down a vehicle, though



original game, two sides in teams of up to four fight for control of a map covered in territory points. Some give you fuel, some munitions and others manpower, but you must ensure your supply lines are safe to earn their benefits, which means keeping your territory connected. Play against the more aggressive enemy AI and you'll find this a challenge, with computer squads pushing deep to cut off unprotected points. Success, meanwhile, is dependent not on base destruction, but holding special victory points that force down your opponents' ticker. If theirs hits zero before yours, the day is won.

It's here that some of the new systems really come into their own. The exposure technology, for example, makes for one decent showcase campaign mission where you'll learn to respect General Winter, but sets a new rhythm in multiplayer matches. Sporadic blizzards strike, during which troops must get out of the cold or find campfires and wait out the storm lest they freeze to death. The weather offers moments of comparative calm, and encourages the use of troop transports in a way that normal skirmishes don't. TrueSight tech, meanwhile, rewards canny placement, requiring generals to get eyeballs on enemies in order to ferret them out.

We played during the open beta, and some balance issues were evident, as is perhaps to be expected with two such wonderfully asymmetrical sides. We've seen mortars overused, bombarding all around them to oblivion and requiring too much hands-on direction to overcome relative to their cost, while the race to get tanks out dominates matches. We found the short early game was curiously decisive, too – we'd usually won or lost within ten minutes, although the seesawing of territory points and army sizes continued for 20 more.



CARE PACKAGE
Moving with the times, perk-like 'intelligence bulletins' have been introduced as part of multiplayer loadouts. They're earned through specific feats in-game and by increasing your rank, and range from insignificant percentage advantages to hefty boosts. Each side gets to pick three before battle, as well as three generals, each with a different roster of special abilities. While we rarely noticed our perks, the generals make a huge difference to playstyle, often drawing the focus still further away from traditional base construction with a go-to unit that can be bought straight from the HUD. New generals will be part of post-launch DLC initiatives, so Relic will have to be careful not to unbalance the game with future commanders.

ABOVE While the effects of ice were eagerly anticipated, the system's simplistic: if a tank or unit is hit by a weapon that shatters the surface beneath, they fall in and die. There's no noticeable weight limit either

Still, Relic has a proven track record in patch support, which gives us hope for the future.

The dated unit AI is less forgivable, with tanks in particular subject to dodgy interpretations of orders. We've had to stop one of our Panzers from trying to occupy the same space as a friend's tank, leaving both unable to move. And we do wish our armour wouldn't rush forwards to go turret to turret with foes – it makes them harder to defend. Likewise, squads seem to take the path of least geographical resistance by default, even if that means strolling past an enemy gun emplacement.

The Theatre Of War missions – 18 free, bolstered by a mini pack with preorders and certain editions that's DLC for everyone else – round off the package, collecting together solo and co-op challenges, plus AI skirmishes. Each introduces new rules, and it's here that Relic has allowed its mission designers to run riot. One match might pitch you against a force of experienced units, while another gives you a time limit to bring down a number of structures with rocket artillery. After the clunky story, it's a refreshing change of pace, and the one-shot structure makes it great to dip into.

Taken as a whole, *COH2* has advanced on some fronts but lost ground on others. Attempting to explore the Eastern Front thematically proves misjudged, while persistent unit stupidity is wearing thin after seven years and four games. Counteracting that are the core mechanics, which are as enjoyable as ever, and there are smart new missions to test series veterans. It's not a glorious revolution, then, but *COH2* is a solid continuation of the finest WWII RTS around.

7

Post Script

Interview: Quinn Duffy, game director

Having spent some 15 years at Relic, game director **Quinn Duffy** has a CV littered with strategy classics, including *Homeworld* and the first *Company Of Heroes*. We asked him about the effect of THQ's collapse on his latest work and dealing with the moral minefield between making a game about war and attempting to tell the story of the Eastern Front.



After THQ fell apart, Sega became your publisher and ended up providing more money and time to polish the game. Was there anything you were able to include that might not have made it in otherwise?
I wouldn't say there was any explicit feature stuff, apart from the ability now to get our own server stuff going – that was a big one. And we knew right away that was the first thing we were going to do. But just the ability to do the kind of 'feel-polish' on the tuning, getting into some of the nitty-gritty on some of those units to make them feel unique and interesting, was a big benefit and something I've enjoyed. It's something *Company Of Heroes* lives on: that detail [and] polish on the units.

Exposure and the dangers of a cold climate were obvious focuses of the build-up. Was it tricky to add that layer on top of the micromanagement systems?
Yeah, for sure. I think whenever you put that additional pressure on the player, you know, people aren't going to react well in many cases. They're going to see it as a burden. But what we try to do is add additional benefit. Initially the blizzards were really punishing on infantry and so we tried to – and later in patches – make the blizzard more [nuanced]… You know, it shuts down some of your off-map attacks, things like air strikes. It affects how much scatter your artillery has. So infantry can capture a point with less risk of being instantly bombarded by artillery and mortars. We allowed them to go camouflaged in deep snow, so you can do some more ambushes and things like that… So there's little tactical benefits to blizzards that help infantry survive.

The campaign encourages a disregard for the lives of conscripts. How did you try to make it engaging to play as expendable troops?
One of the things that we tried to do is inject personality. And one of the reasons we still have this fully mobile camera and put as much detail as we do into the units is so that you can get up close and see them… Zoom out and you're still making the mental connection to the detail you've seen, and to the little idiosyncrasies in movement, and how the speech is delivered and what they say. All those things kind of help inject a little bit of, hopefully, empathy in the player. And you know there are cases where really one of the lessons of the game – and the creative vision – was to let the player experience the ruthless truth of war. And this is a challenge, but we wanted to make sure there's consequences for [a] decision. Sometimes it's as simple as having your little squads die and say terrible, horrible things to you. There's a level of [us] injecting a bit of guilt. They tend to be small, subtle things – presentational things as opposed to pure gameplay – although in campaign you have the Order 227 mechanic that challenges you to not retreat.

"It's touchy subject matter. It's a very different war and a different experience to the Western [Front of] WWII"



Were you worried about the moral clash between western ideals and enacting the callous tactics of Stalinist Russia, and how that might be received?
Yeah, it was a concern. It's touchy subject matter. It's a very different war and a very different experience than the Western [Front of] WWII. Maybe akin a little more to the sacrifice and battles you read [about] in WWI. Callous commanders, Douglas Haig, lions led by lambs – those kinds of things. And so there's maybe some level of awareness of that kind of sacrifice and wastage in the western audience, but it was a bit of a challenge. One of the things we do in the game is try to get players on the front line, where it's their little soldiers and their impact, and getting down below the mulch, so to speak.

It's been seven years since the first *Company Of Heroes*. Do you think the expectations of PC strategy gamers have moved on, especially for multiplayer?
If I'm looking at our metrics, I think people are liking the gameplay. And I think being able to deliver a refreshed version of what they played in *COH* is pretty appealing to our fans. [They're] the ones we really initially built this game for – for *COH* fans, that community. So I think it's looking really good in terms of reaching those people. I think what we're seeing as a big impact, even in the last year or two, that seems to be coming out more and more are sort of those community features for casting, and that sort of stuff, so we were able to integrate Twitch TV stuff right into the game. People are streaming and casting right out of the game into Twitch, and that's been huge. We've seen hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of beta casts.



After the Eastern Front, where do you go next?
We've got a whole war to choose from. So we'll be back. We've got to figure out which piece of the war we want to cover next. We've already got plans in the works. Relic has a tendency to do a launch title and then we do expansion packs to build on that, so we're looking at what we're going to do next. And that gives us a chance to keep building the Eastern Front and figure out a new piece of the war to introduce a little bit later. ■

Plants Vs Zombies 2: It's About Time

Publisher EA
Developer In-house (PopCap)
Format Android, iOS
Release July 18 (iOS), 2013 (Android)

The biggest criticism we can make of *Plants Vs Zombies 2* will be of little concern to its players: it's hard to see how it's going to make much money. It is remarkably generous for a free-to-play game. There are no paywalls, no demands you pester Facebook friends to progress, and no energy system. Item and currency drops are plentiful. Yes, *Plants Vs Zombies 2* is an F2P game, but it rarely feels like one.

Much of that comes from being bound to a rigid set of rules and mechanics. Level layouts and enemy placements are the same every time you play a mission, and when you fail – which you will, for this is much harder than *Plants Vs Zombies* – you always know why. *PVZ2* has all the trappings of free-to-play, including its currencies and premium boosts, but none of its traps.

Take Plant Food, which you drag and drop onto plants to power them up temporarily. It's the classic free-to-play booster, either accrued through play (dropped by zombies that glow green) or bought at any time, even mid-level, for 1,000 in-game coins. It could, if cynically implemented, ruin everything. Instead it enhances it, offering both PopCap and you the freedom to experiment. The original's early game, for instance, was about building up an economy, planting enough Sunflowers to ensure a steady flow of sun, the game's vital resource. Now you can drop Plant Food onto a Sunflower for an instant 150 sun. Drag it onto a Peashooter to unleash a burst of fire that will mow down a handful of regular zombies in seconds. A Cabbage-pult will send a volley of ordnance into the air, which falls all over the screen. Yet Plant Food drop rates are so frequent that you'll often have to use one of your starting stock of three to make room for another. It doesn't carry over from one level to the next, either, so when the final wave arrives, teeming with undead, you might as well use whatever you've got.

Much of the first *PVZ* could be played with the same group of plants. Here you're more inclined to diversify, taking new plants into battle just to see what effect Plant Food has on them. We never much cared for the Cabbage-pult, to be honest, using it only when the first game gave us no alternative. Now it's regularly by our side, that full-screen attack obliterating entire waves of zombies and on several occasions helping us atone for what could have been a fatal mistake.

Plant Food changes the formula, then, but *PVZ2*'s structure – three eras, each spread over its own world map – also brings with it a host of places and new ways in which to play, as well as thematically appropriate twists to level design. In Egypt, tombstones block horizontal fire and must be destroyed or bypassed. In Pirate Seas, gaps between two ships are crossed by rope-swinging zombies or imps fired from cannons. In the Wild West, you drag minecarts up and down the screen as zombie attack patterns dictate.

We've been challenged, but we've never felt forced into spending our in-game coins to get us past a difficulty spike



Clearing the ten or so levels that make up each world's critical path is only the start, with completion of the final stage opening up Star Objectives, which task you with replaying each level up to three more times with new sets of rules. There might be a limit on the number of plants you can lose or have in play at once. You might have to produce a large amount of sun or not spend any for a certain amount of time. You're often tasked with killing a large quantity of zombies in a tight time limit, or with preventing them trampling over a line of flowers placed halfway across the screen.

Further ways to play lie in branches off the main path behind locked gates, keys to which are dropped by zombies. But while these seem ripe for monetisation, they aren't available through in-app purchase in our review build. Each gate leads to one new plant or item and three progressively harder levels, dubbed Brain Busters, based on new concepts. In Last Stand, you're given 2,000 sun with which to set out your stall, but once the action starts you play no role in proceedings bar deploying Plant Food. In the OK Corral, you're given just one plant per zombie wave and shown exactly where onscreen your foes will make their entrance. These world maps play host to remarkable variety, and considerable challenge, too.

Perhaps its toughest levels are where *PVZ2* will make its money. But while we've been challenged, we've never felt forced into spending our in-game coins to get us past a difficulty spike. We've spent coins on Plant Food and the new touch-control power-ups in a pinch, but with 15 hours on the clock we're sitting on almost 50,000 coins. The casual players who made up the vast majority of *Plants Vs Zombies*' 150 million installs may feel more compelled to pay up. At least the nonlinear world-map structure means that they won't find themselves stuck on a single level for weeks on end, a tactic employed by many successful free-to-play games and one to which many expected PopCap, beholden to its new EA paymaster, to succumb.

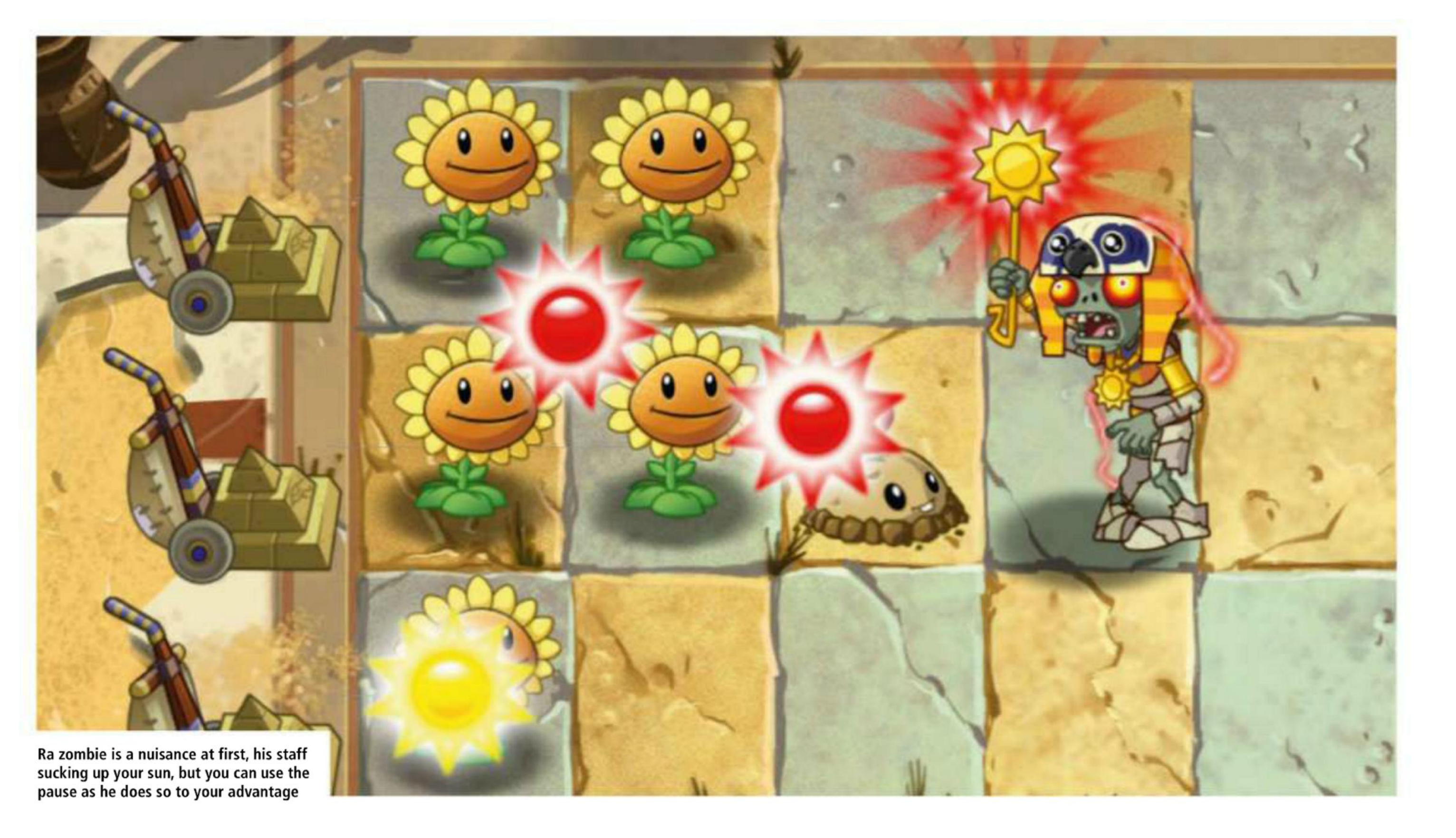
A note of caution: PopCap is finessing its pricing structure during a soft launch in Australia, so we can't say for sure what top-ups, premium items and the handful of IAP plants will cost on launch day. This is a live service, too, so if the game isn't making enough money, all it takes is a slight back-end tweak to redress what is currently a pleasingly generous balance. But on the evidence of our playthrough, *PVZ2* shows that PopCap is still the educated gamer's favourite casual gaming company. This is a remarkable sequel, one that takes its predecessor not as a template, but a jumping-off point. And for all the justifiable concern about its chosen business model, its implementation of the free-to-play model prizes players' hearts above the contents of their wallets.

9





TOP This zombie's barrel will crush anything in its path, meaning he has to be dealt with quickly; once he's killed, the barrel remains in place. Destroy it and two imp pirates jump out and then take up positions on adjacent rows. ABOVE Coconut Cannons are manually fired and subject to a cooldown period in which they grab 40 winks. They star in Cannons Away, a mode in which you must take down waves of seagull-carried zombies to reach a target score, with comboing kills essential to completing the task. LEFT This is the effect of using Plant Food. The Threepeater lets loose a multidirectional burst of fire that sweeps in a 180-degree arc like something out of a Cave shooter. It's powerful on its own and incredible with Torchwood help



Ra zombie is a nuisance at first, his staff sucking up your sun, but you can use the pause as he does so to your advantage

Post Script

The cautionary tales that make Plants Vs Zombies 2's achievements clear

The free-to-play sceptics have a point. There are, without doubt, those for whom a free download is seen as a Trojan horse to access the smartphones and wallets in our pockets, whose monetisation approach is such that they design games to make more money out of players than a full-price game ever could. It's easy to see why many saw EA's acquisition of PopCap as a bad omen, and news of *Plants Vs Zombies 2* being free to play as vindication. It's easy to imagine how they could have been proven right.

Certainly the free-to-play landscape is littered with case studies of how not to do it. Zynga came for our folding cash through our Facebook walls, with seemingly every action taken by *FarmVille*-playing friends cluttering up our news feeds. Zynga's model is based on 'whales': the two to three per cent who spend so heavily that they subsidise the millions of free players. And before Facebook's policy change, *FarmVille* didn't have players so much as marketeers, whose every action served to further spread word about its existence.

Zynga is now in decline, and the current darling of F2P Facebook and mobile gaming is King, a UK developer whose *Candy Crush Saga* recently crossed the 100 million player mark. First impressions are delightful: it's a match-three puzzler that owes more than a little to PopCap's *Bejeweled*, charmingly presented and with several smart design ideas. It's currently got some 350 levels, laid out on a sprawling map that lets you track friends' progress as well as your own, but it slams its first paywall down after 35, demanding you secure a 'ticket' to the next world from three Facebook friends or pay 69p to progress. Run out of your stock of five lives, and you can either pay 69p for another set, ask Facebook friends to send you one, or wait for each to recharge.

There's a litany of power-ups available for a nominal fee. There are permanent boosters that don't so much threaten the game's balance as cast it off entirely. Want to freeze time in its few against-the-clock levels? The power's yours for just £17.49. The challenge ramps up to the point that success is more about luck than judgement – a smart move in a corner of the industry where difficulty spikes make for lucrative revenue streams – and there are psychological tricks, too, with the Facebook version of the game placing the Buy button in the same place onscreen as the Continue one and interspersing its unlock screens with invitations to purchase.

Plants Vs Zombies 2 won't spam your Facebook feed. It will post to your wall if you let it, but PopCap's new owner has invested heavily in exploring new ways to use the so-called social graph. It might bundle up your day's activity into a single post, for example, but you're never asked or forced to pester your friends with invites and requests. Its permanent boosters are minor in nature – one increases your starting sun from 50 to 75 – and fairly priced ($1.99 apiece in the build we played). The only thing blocking your progress is the limit of your own ability, and you're given plenty of tools to help you along.

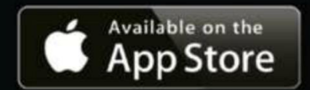
It could have been so different. Key and coin drop rates could have been so miserly as to send you scurrying to the App Store for top-ups. The handful of plants only available through real-money purchase could have been overpowered and limited to three uses, yet there is nothing here to threaten balance. The only potentially game-breaking element is Plant Food. But instead of a premium item, it's the core mechanic around which the game has been built, its greatest source of innovation and enjoyment, and it's readily available through normal play. We only hope *Plants Vs Zombies 2* succeeds to such an extent that it, too, becomes a free-to-play case study, one that shows that this most controversial of business models really can benefit players and moneymen at the same time. ■

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State Of Decay

You wait ages for a zombie game and then – actually, no. You never wait ages for a zombie game, but *State Of Decay* emerging alongside Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us* makes for a fascinating comparison all the same. Both games kick off with a nasty infection, but the two studios have very different ideas about how one should weather an apocalypse, and highly contrasting notions of what games should be.

State Of Decay is the systemic, emergent, player-choice-centred zombie game you've always had tense nightmares about. As an open-world survival sim that forces you to juggle resources, maintain defences and morale, venture forth on desperate reconnaissance missions and keep the neighbouring zombie population under control, Undead Labs has thrust an unusual amount of agency into our quaking, unprepared hands. Want to pick a new home to replace the old church you and your allies initially hole up in? By all means go and find one, but whether it's in a defensible position or a convenient location is up to you. Want to pump resources into your fortifications? That's fine, but you might have been better off establishing a few outposts farther afield. To play *State Of Decay* is to willingly submit yourself to an exhausting series of cost-benefit analyses. And you won't know if you've made the correct choices until everyone dies.

It's the game's permanence that makes every choice in *State Of Decay* a fascinating, potentially catastrophic one. Ammo runs out, food supplies dwindle, and survivors perish – and this knowledge repeatedly forces you compromise. At first, it's minor sacrifices, such as choosing not to help one of your allies on a zombie-hunting trip because you really need to track down more medicine for the HQ. Then come bigger decisions, such as deciding not to go in search of a missing survivor (who you probably should have helped earlier) because there's a horde marching towards your door. Because *State Of Decay* lets you flick between characters at will, presuming you've earned their trust, everyone is expendable: there's no player character firmly encased in plot armour for the duration of the campaign.

There's such a jumble of systems, rules and objectives in *State Of Decay* that it's a wonder it holds together. It nearly doesn't, since the core survival sim is infinitely more interesting than the low-production-value *GTA*-with-zombies storyline surrounding it. You can defer story missions indefinitely, but the game doesn't bother to explain this, or to draw a clear distinction between the core storyline and its optional, time-sensitive objectives. And that's just one instance of the arcane inscrutability throughout, which also manifests itself in the form of unusual controls; crucial, location-sensitive menus hidden behind a downward tap of the D-pad; and overreliance on overlong tutorial texts, which pop up at their own discretion in the top-left corner of the screen. *State Of Decay* is already unforgiving, and gains nothing from being elusive about its inner workings. Likewise, the impact of its choices and strategic decisions would be in no way lessened had they been presented more clearly.

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Undead Labs
Format 360 (version tested), PC
Release Out now (360), TBA (PC)

It's the game's permanence that makes every choice in State Of Decay a fascinating, potentially catastrophic one



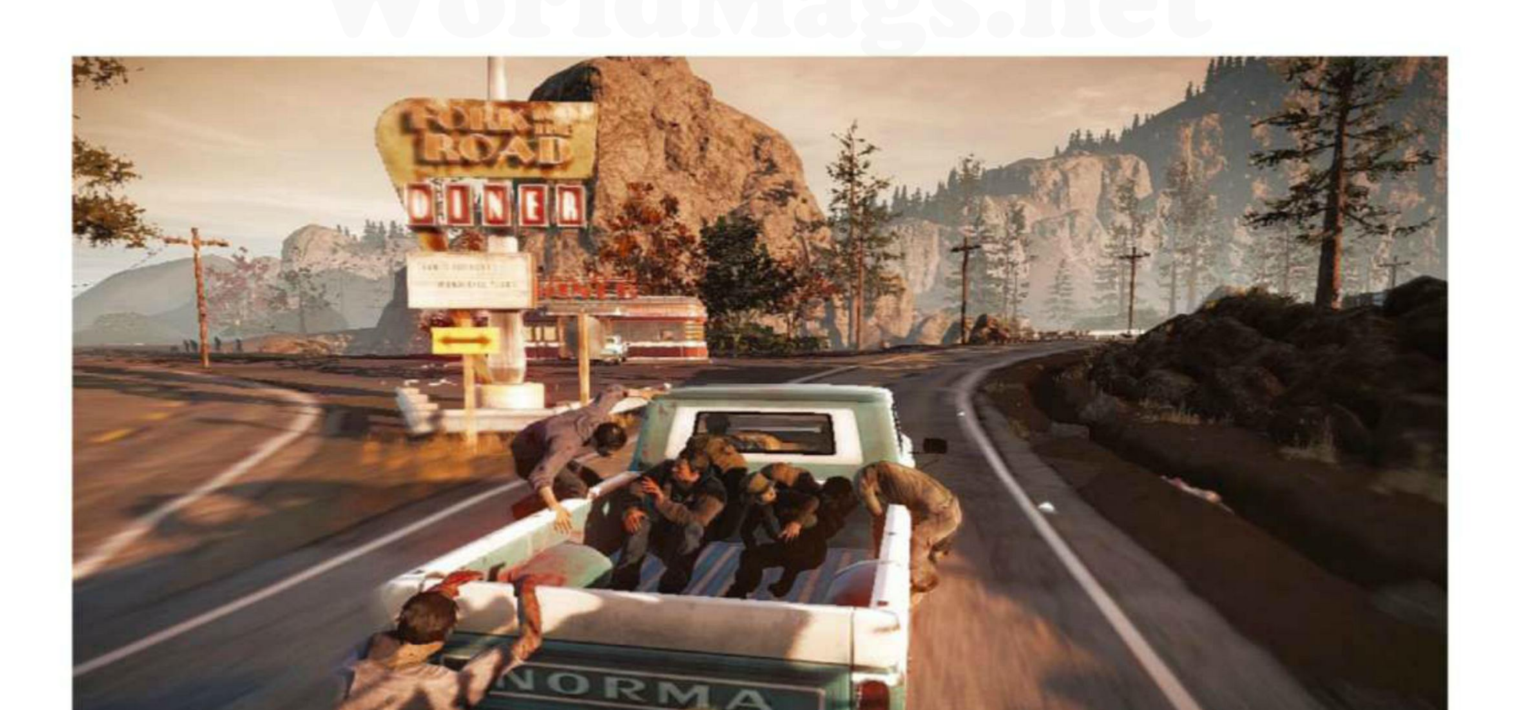
CONGESTION CHARGE
Grand Theft Auto taught us that a brand-new sports car will disappear should you, say, wander around a corner, so we've learned not to get too attached to our in-game vehicles. Best unlearn that if you want to succeed in *State Of Decay*. There are plenty of cars to be found in the game's rural setting of Trumbull Valley, but not one respawns. Having learned this, we began to regret our early zombie-hunting excursions, in which we'd wreck vehicles by repeatedly ploughing head-on into hordes. That's still a valid tactic at times, and you can repair vehicles overnight so long as you have a mechanic, but cars in *State Of Decay* are another resource to manage.

With so many genres jostling for attention here, it was inevitable some aspects of the game would shamble along less elegantly than others, and it's the combat that suffers. Undead Labs' system seems intentionally clunky, focusing on crude melee attacks and a rapidly depleted stamina gauge. But the execution is clunky, too, filled with jarring, instant transitions to finishers and a reliance on an RPG-like levelling system that can make early encounters particularly gruelling. Fighting with allies makes things easier, though the AI is awfully prone to running into the grenades and Molotovs you limply toss in front you. "Trust lost – ally set on fire," we're told every time this happens. We'd have hoped we could have trusted them to keep away from a flame. Combat also provides opportunities for the game's ever-present performance issues to blossom into full-blown environmental hazards, as screen tearing, pop-in texture glitches and framerate drops interfere with dense crowd battles and panicked escapes.

As a base-building management sim, however, *State Of Decay* fares better, with a clear enough interface (once you find it) and a never-ending procession of dilemmas. Keep rescuing survivors from nearby enclaves and morale in your cramped base will drop until you build a new sleeping area. But that sleeping area will fill the space you had earmarked for a vegetable patch to counter the nearby town's rapidly diminishing food supplies. Crucially, your decisions here will spill out into the wider game: focus on defensibility, for instance, and you'll remain secure at the cost of needing to go on more frequent supply runs.

State Of Decay works because it takes the clichés of zombie fiction – clashing survivor personalities, scavenging for supplies, roaming hordes, infested houses, amateurishly fortified safehouses – and successfully translates them into a set of intersecting systems and rules. Sometimes these rules seem arbitrary. Scavenge too quickly through houses for supplies, for example, and you might, somehow, make such a racket while rifling through a backpack that a crowd of nearby undead draws near. At other points, they integrate beautifully, such as when your attempt to clear out an infestation that's affecting the morale of your safehouse alerts a nearby horde. The game never judges you, offering no morality system despite the frequent dilemmas and difficult choices its systems organically generate. But it certainly tests you. This is as close as we've come to putting our lazily daydreamed zombie survival plans into effect.

7



ABOVE If a zombie grabs the side of your vehicle, you can smack it with the door. That's less helpful when they've attached themselves to the rear, which makes driving dangerously the only solution.
RIGHT Alongside your ordinary infected, there's the familiar set of special zombie types. Overweight, bloated zombies charge you, screamers alert nearby undead, while feral zombies pounce like animals and soak up damage



BELOW As well as a day/night cycle, time passes when you're away from your machine. Try to leave things in order at the safehouse or you can return to disaster





ABOVE Packs of survivors seem to organically set up shop in, well, abandoned shops, or any other defensible structure. Sometimes they'll ask to join you, at other times they can be traded with or simply ignored

Gunpoint

Publisher Tom Francis
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

Videogames rarely follow the maxim 'Always leave the audience wanting more'. But in his debut creation, developer Tom Francis (who has a day job on **Edge** sister mag PC Gamer) does just that. *Gunpoint* offers you one of gaming's most entertaining toys – a tool with gameworld-altering abilities enough to join the worshipful company of Aperture Science's Portal Device and *Half-Life 2*'s Gravity Gun – then gives us an all-too-brief three hours' worth of levels in which to use it. That tool is the Crosslink, and while it's by no means the only gadget waiting to be unleashed in this 2D espionage sandbox, it's the one you'll revisit *Gunpoint* for.

The Crosslink is the signature tool of Richard Conway, freelance spy, hacker extraordinaire, and one-man campaign to revive the trenchcoat-and-fedora ensemble for the postmillennial gamer. With it, he's able to rewire entire buildings and cause all sorts of mischief. It can do everything from turning a light switch into a door-release mechanism to setting up Rube-Goldberg-machine-like chains of guard-befuddling mayhem. Conway also never leaves the house without his Bullfrog hypertrousers. Charge them with a press of the left mouse button and then release to launch him on a parabolic arc capable of clearing whole storeys in a single bound.

These gizmos are going to come in handy, because at the game's start Conway becomes chief suspect for the murder of Selena Delgado. He's innocent, of course, but a Bullfrog mishap means he's been caught on camera crashing through the glass roof of the arms company Delgado worked at mere moments before her assassination. This sets in motion a tale of misdirection, corrupt corporate types and tackling goons through windows and then punching their lights out on beds of broken glass.

It's the stuff of countless noir films and crime paperbacks, then, but Francis writes it warmly and with tongue firmly in cheek. And unlike the hacks, his witty tangle of plot threads takes you to clever places. Specifically, it takes you to a set of fiendishly secured locations, often with the goal of hacking into a computer system protected by gun-wielding guards, alarms and hand scanners. These puzzle-box levels are presented in artfully pixellated 2D, with building floors in cross section against the eternally moody night sky. Flick the mouse wheel to enter Crosslink mode and the muted palette is replaced by silhouettes on a blue background, with circuit connections in pulsating lines of bright colour. The controls are simple enough as to be near invisible, with movement handled by WASD and almost everything else done by mouse.

Francis sets the rules up early: gunshots are fatal and guards shoot accurately, which means being seen almost always equals Conway becoming a crumpled heap of blood-splattered brown overcoat. But autosaves are frequent, and upon death you get a choice of three time points to jump back to, so you're never more than button press from being able to try out a different tack. Circuits of various colours do not intermix, meaning you'll often need to tap into colour-coded control boxes to progress.

Your approach to these levels is your own. You'll get a grade at the end – as well as ratings for the noise you make, witnesses you leave, the level of violence you dish out and the time it took – but there's no sense of judgement beyond that mark, and not every client treasures a light touch. You can play *Gunpoint* living on twitch reflexes and some simple rewiring, but we found it most satisfying to get elaborate with our Crosslink and then execute the acrobatics necessary to carry out our plans.

Your approach to these levels is your own. You'll get a grade at the end, but there's no sense of judgement beyond that

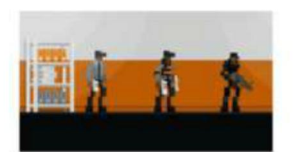
As the tests of your infiltrative cunning grow steadily more taxing, so the balance of your bank account rises, opening up access to more gadgets. These range from the functional, such as tools for muffled window smashing, to the positively game breaking, including a gun of your own and the ability to kick down doors. Again, Francis offers freedom: bar the finale, the choice to use them or not is left in your hands, and access to the most ludicrously powerful kit is gated smartly so as to not ruin your first playthrough. We can't help but feel the gun blows away most of the fun in a replay, however.

When the story ends, you're left wanting more. Longevity isn't desirable for its own sake, but *Gunpoint* doesn't give itself enough room to truly unfurl everything it has to offer, nor does it offer much in the way of codified incentives to try new approaches. You can revisit the missions to tweak your grade and hunt achievements, and we'd happily play through the campaign more than once, but there's still not the variety of levels and challenges here to explore such an enjoyable range of gadgets.

That problem may soon be overcome, since a level editor's included with the game. It's simple to use, with walls, doors and windows snapping to invisible grids, and while you can't set up custom wiring, we didn't feel the want of it. Steam Workshop support is planned, too, but sharing levels now is a case of fishing files from the Levels folder and uploading them pell-mell to the web.

Francis intends to support *Gunpoint* post release, though, providing the opportunity to do the minor rewiring required to get the most from his elegant creation. But even in its current form, there's a wealth of ideas and a set of powers that few games twice this length manage to pack in.

8



TOM WASN'T ALONE

Tom Francis is the mind behind *Gunpoint*'s concept and programming, but the game's creation wasn't a one-man show. He needed some help with art and audio, so he decided to instigate an open submissions process for each one via his Twitter feed and blog. These were popular, to say the least. When it came to music, for instance, Francis ended up with over 45 composers pitching him their ideas. In the end, he choose the work of Ryan Ike for the mission music, but liked what Francisco Cerda and John Robert Matz provided so much that he used their work for the menu music and theme tune respectively.

RIGHT You can take out guards indirectly by wiring up traps, such as hitting them with doors or electrocuting a nearby device. Alternatively, you can take the direct approach, and knock them through a window onto the street





TOP Conway's a lithe climber, able to shimmy up walls and clamber along ceilings. Paired with the Bullfrog trousers, his is a flexible moveset for getting about without attracting unwanted attention.
ABOVE Glass exists for one purpose in *Gunpoint*: to leap through with a satisfying shattering sound. But if you want to avoid making noise, there's the Hushcracker for that

The Crosslink can attach anything on one circuit to anything else in that colour, and puzzles often revolve around accessing new loops in order to progress

Marvel Heroes

Publisher Gazillion Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

Marvel superheroes belong in a hierarchy that's well understood but rarely written down. It doesn't matter how many double-decker buses are needed to calculate their strength, or what class of mutant they are. The formula is this: have they starred in a movie recently? Was that movie popular? It was? Great! Welcome to the front of the line, Mr Stark.

Gazillion Entertainment's *Marvel Heroes* is a free-to-play action-MMORPG that codifies the popularity of Marvel characters with ruthless precision. When you first load the game, you're presented with a selection of five free costumed crimefighters – Daredevil, Storm, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch and The Thing – that even dedicated comics fans would concede qualify as B-listers. You then travel to the Raft, a superhero prison under siege, and learn the basics of clicking on villains until they burst into a shower of loot, experience and credits. A boss battle later, you're returned to Avengers HQ and given another random hero from that pool.

If you'd like to play through the rest of the eight-chapter campaign as Iron Man or Spider-Man, it's time to pay up. We're not talking chump change either, with big hitters setting you back around £14 ($20), and character packs of famous Marvel teams – well, four members from them, plus appropriate skins – costing £65. You can slum it with a cheaper option, of course, and it is possible to receive heroes as loot drops, but the chances of a decent one tumbling into your lap are low. Expect to be directed to the cash store at every turn.

On top of the cost of each hero, there are costumes: items that determine your character's appearance, based on comic book designs and movie appearances. Want to look like Iron Man in the Avengers? Then pop out that credit card again. *Marvel Heroes'* costly unlocks are problematic because they invite a value comparison that it struggles to live up to. *Torchlight II* has four hero classes, costs a fraction of a character pack, and it's a better action-RPG than *Heroes* in almost every regard.

Gazillion's rendition of the Marvel universe is thorough and detailed, but the action-RPG formula actively fights any attempt to create a meaningful sense of place. The streets of Hell's Kitchen swarm with gangsters, who die by the hundreds to roving mobs of superheroes, respawn, then die again. The story's the same in the New Jersey docklands and approaches its nadir when you find yourself blowing up hordes of Mafiosos in New York's swanky Upper East Side before taking a break to punch out a nearby Mole Man.

This dissonance is compounded by the sight of a dozen heroes identical to yourself running around everywhere you go. A given event boss – multiplayer encounters that trigger periodically in the game's open zones – is likely to be downed by a great many Things, some Hawkeyes, the odd Hulk, and perhaps a Spider-Man if anyone's feeling flush. There's a footnote in the backstory to explain why everyone has a dozen or so doppelgängers running around, but that isn't the issue. It's the pang you feel every time you bump into another you and realise you're not special, a feeling that eats away at the value of your investment in a character.

The kinetics of combat don't reach Diablo III's high bar but do a great deal to mask the adventure's repetitiveness



The game fares better when it embraces its sillier side. Beating up ninjas and HYDRA goons in the fictional city-state of Madripoor has a matinee adventure charm, and Gazillion's work on each character's animations and ability effects is of high quality. There's a decent sense of impact, particularly with heavy hitters such as Thor. The kinetics of combat don't quite reach *Diablo III*'s high bar – Blizzard's Barbarian still feels more like The Hulk than Gazillion's Hulk ever does – but do a great deal to mask the adventure's repetitiveness.

The fantasy is less well-realised when characters are defined by their mobility, a form of play that the isometric action-RPG doesn't readily support. Spider-Man and Iron Man both fit this pattern: web-slinging and flight are present but hamstrung by the format. Watching an expensively outfitted Iron Man jogging across the street to blast a goon is an object lesson in the difference between expectation and reality.

The campaign takes around eight hours to complete and there's a thin layer of repeatable endgame content to see you the rest of the way up the level tree. For the most part, you'll be spending the skill points you earn on incremental improvements to abilities, but there are some more entertaining mechanics tied to particular characters. Jean Grey can transform into her Phoenix form with an alternate set of capabilities, for example. Stat-boosting loot is hero-specific and has no visual impact, with the exception of unlockable particle effects that can entirely spoil a character's visual coherence, as in the case of the player who added a flame effect to Captain America's head.

Despite all these gripes, *Marvel Heroes* isn't a disaster. Good overall production values make it a passable way to spend time, and there's legitimate depth to some of its underlying systems. What it isn't is a passable way to spend money. This is the version of the free-to-play model that invites reckless impulse spending far in excess of the amount you are likely to pay for a full-price game, or even a full-price MMOG with a subscription. The game is also lumbered with a tragic split personality. On one hand, there's a lot to do, and if you like the look of one of the initial five heroes you can do all of it for free with a little grinding. On the other hand, *Marvel Heroes* is so eager for you to spend – and so keen to extract the most out of your wallet when you do – that the price tag of the game in real-world terms can soon become astonishingly disproportionate to its quality.

4



LEFT The characters that are the most satisfying to control are the ones that specialise in big attacks with serious impact. So if you're planning on splashing out on a hero, we'd recommend picking The Hulk or Thor over Spider-Man. **BELOW** There's a lot to discover for fans of the fiction. The narrative starts off centred on events involving the Avengers and SHIELD before moving on to the X-Men. **BOTTOM** Three Things, a Hulk and a Spidey or two is about average for *Marvel Heroes*' group battles. The necessities that arise from being an MMOG stretch the game's fiction to breaking point at times



ABOVE Gazillion's work on *Marvel Heroes*' animations and effects has paid off, and unleashing the power of a levelled-up character can be spectacular. Seeing everyone else doing it too can take the shine off for you, though





Mario & Luigi: Dream Team Bros

The opening of *Mario & Luigi: Dream Team Bros* is slow enough to induce mild wooziness in anybody. A two-hour course of tutorials will do that, especially if you're familiar with AlphaDream's *Mario & Luigi* RPGs. But once you've recovered from the soporific effects of being told to press one button per brother for pretty much everything they do, and got past the usual damsel-in-distress plot device, you'll have trouble kipping through the rest of *Dream Team Bros*.

Fans of the series already know why. We play these games for two reasons: AlphaDream's irreverent take on the Mushroom Kingdom crew, and an absorbing battle system that rewards well-timed button presses and careful observation. The siblings may not have the range of attacks of a Cloud Strife or a battalion of Pokémon, but the remix of turn-based RPG conventions in which they star is still involved. Hit A at the precise moment Mario lands a jump attack on a foe to flip him into the air for a second bounce. Time a tap of B with the apex of Luigi's hammer backswing for maximum damage. Watch your enemies carefully during their turn to learn the tells that will enable you to predict their moves and dodge them, or even land a counter attack.

Every *Mario & Luigi* sequel to date has had a signature twist – *Partners In Time* gave you two sets of bros to handle across the ages, while *Bowser's Inside Story* let you play as the series' gleefully evil lizard antagonist – and *Dream Team Bros* is no exception. It's tied to the now-traditional wafer-thin plot, which here mainly revolves around the Pi'illo, a race of daftly designed but overly po-faced sentient cushion-headed creatures. They have become legend since the entire lot wound up trapped in the Dream World eons ago, leaving only petrified pillows to mark their passing. It's not long before a dozy Luigi ends up laying his head on one of these artefacts for a nap, allowing players to plunge into the Dream World for themselves.

While there, you're effectively inside Luigi's mind, giving AlphaDream room to explore his psyche. On a more literal level, Mario does his exploring there via 2D platforming, as opposed to the isometric 3D view of the overworld, in a clear nod to *Inside Story*'s own nod to Nintendo history. If that all sounds incongruously like Inception, prepare for things to go full-on Christopher Nolan shortly after you set foot in these charmingly flat, supersaturated landscapes. Dreamy Luigi – a lionised version of the real one – accompanies his brother for the platforming and is able to manipulate his dreamscape via clumsily named Luiginary Works. He might possess a familiarly proportioned tree, for instance, turning his bristling moustache into a pair of bough-like arms with which to fling his brother to otherwise unreachable heights. Or he could enter a constellation to multiply himself into a tower of clones, which can topple over gaps to press distant switches.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer AlphaDream
Format 3DS
Release July 12 (EU), 18 (JP), August 11 (US)

In the Dream World, when you've finished bouncing on an enemy, a rain of ghostly Luigis will follow and pummel foes



Dream logic is in full force, but it at least gives the level designers licence to enliven the series' basic platforming, which has always been mildly hamstrung by having to control two characters at once.

Battles in the Dream World are similarly altered. They follow the same structure as those in the 'real' world, but instead of controlling the bros independently, Luigi merges into Mario, multiplying his every attack. Now when you've finished bouncing on an enemy, a rain of ghostly Luigis will follow and pummel your foes, too. Mobs grow correspondingly larger, requiring light crowd management and a change in defensive strategy.

While the real and Dream World playstyles are complementary, aesthetically the latter wins hands down. Yes, the 3D backdrops have a delightful *Animal Crossing* vibe, but a little antialiasing wouldn't go amiss to round off 'straight' edges that could be mistaken for hacksaw blades. After *Luigi's Mansion 2* and *Super Mario 3D Land*, it's also hard not to resent the sprite-based character work, which somehow contrives to look less good here than in the DS games.

Stereoscopic 3D spruces up the workmanlike visuals, and AlphaDream has clearly considered its gameplay potential, too. Enemies can now attack from four directions, and some boss moves recede or advance into the screen – 3D-assisted positioning can provide a mild advantage for both. The Mario bros in turn have special attacks carried out from new vantage points, which is another fresh touch to bolster a formula that's growing comfortably overfamiliar after three 15- to 20-hour games. The 3D effect's never forced on you, though, and AlphaDream is smart enough to provide quick toggles where it might clash with control. So you can press R to cancel 3D before the special attack where you tilt the 3DS to gather up a Katamari-style ball of Luigis, then boot the giant green mass at foes.

Throw in the levelling system, ranking system, badge system and a closet full of gear, and *Dream Team Bros* is as systematically rich as this series has ever been. What it isn't is as laugh-out-loud funny as its forebears, despite a number of lively returning cast members. The Pi'illos' dialogue is typically a snoozefest, and it's really only when Bowser shows up with his elite team that the jokes start to hit home, a maddening five to six hours in. Oh, and new baddie Antasma is a poor substitute for Fawful screen time in this or any other world.

Following the excellent *Inside Story* was always going to be a big ask, so it's hardly a surprise AlphaDream never quite manages to conjure up anything better than being Bowser. Still, while the comparison to its predecessor does it few favours, rest assured that *Dream Team Bros*' additions and curiously entertaining battles do enough to reawaken the desire to see this adventure through to the end.

7



BELOW Enemy designs vary wildly in quality, from characterful standouts all the way down to the painfully mundane. But the need to learn attack patterns makes you pay attention to each and every foe just the same





LEFT This drilling rig is used for a few light puzzles, with the blue arrow pads being used as switching points to move it between different tracks. Like a lot of the game, it requires careful timing to use well



TOP The Dream World is usually a riot of colour, but this is a deeper level of it than you tend to visit. Bowser, however, is very real, and will test your ability to manage his assault on a vertical 2D plane. **RIGHT** Pratfalls and slapstick make up a chunk of the series' familiar humour, but its lowbrow moments tend to be deployed smartly to compensate. It's a delicate balance, and one that *Dream Team Bros* doesn't always strike correctly





The Swapper

We're pioneers, us gamers. Name an alien world or abandoned edge-of-space outpost and it's likely that we've boldly gone there. So why have *The Swapper*'s Theseus space station and the desolate rock it slowly orbits left us so unnerved?

Perhaps it's the visuals. *The Swapper* is grainy, dark and cast in perpetual soft focus – your eyes can't seem to find purchase on what should be cold, sterile metal and jagged, rocky ground. Its handcrafted art assets (constructed from clay models and everyday materials) could have easily lent homespun warmth to these clanking, empty corridors, but somehow they've done the opposite; shine your torch on the walls of Theseus station and the details can become murkier, the film grain fuzzier and the bloom more obscuring. And beneath all that, the absence of production-line uniformity betrays itself: lines aren't quite straight, details morph into blur. Facepalm Games has fashioned spaces that look more alien the closer you stare, and scored them with a soundtrack that's equally unsettling, occasionally teasing the possibility of something more melodic, only to devolve into a harsh static drone.

All in all, the setting is perfect for a puzzle game built around existential despair. A puzzle-platformer structured like a *Metroid* title, *The Swapper*'s titular piece of B-movie tech allows you to make clones of yourself, which then move in tandem with their creator. By itself this sets up some neat synchronised switch-pressing puzzles, but the device's secondary function swaps bodies with any of your replicas by firing at them. You can only swap into or place new clones based on current line of sight, and this means *The Swapper*'s puzzles are about deciphering the order in which you need to place copies, move around, and hop between them, all while ensuring no one steps out of place.

Soon the game introduces limiting factors in the form of red and blue smudges of light that limit your swapping and clone-placing respectively. These help set up some deviously complex tests, but their contrivance only goes to further the gap between *The Swapper*'s puzzling and its slowly revealed story. The Theseus station has secrets, of course – secrets that tie into your device's disturbing powers – but for the most part the game's exploration of such themes feels separate to the abstract challenges found in its puzzle rooms.

For the most part. But when you need to travel great vertical distances in *The Swapper*, you must daisy chain from clone to clone, placing each new copy above your head and swapping into it, letting your discarded shells fall to the ground. Its clever, creepy and macabre. And that goes for *The Swapper* as a whole.

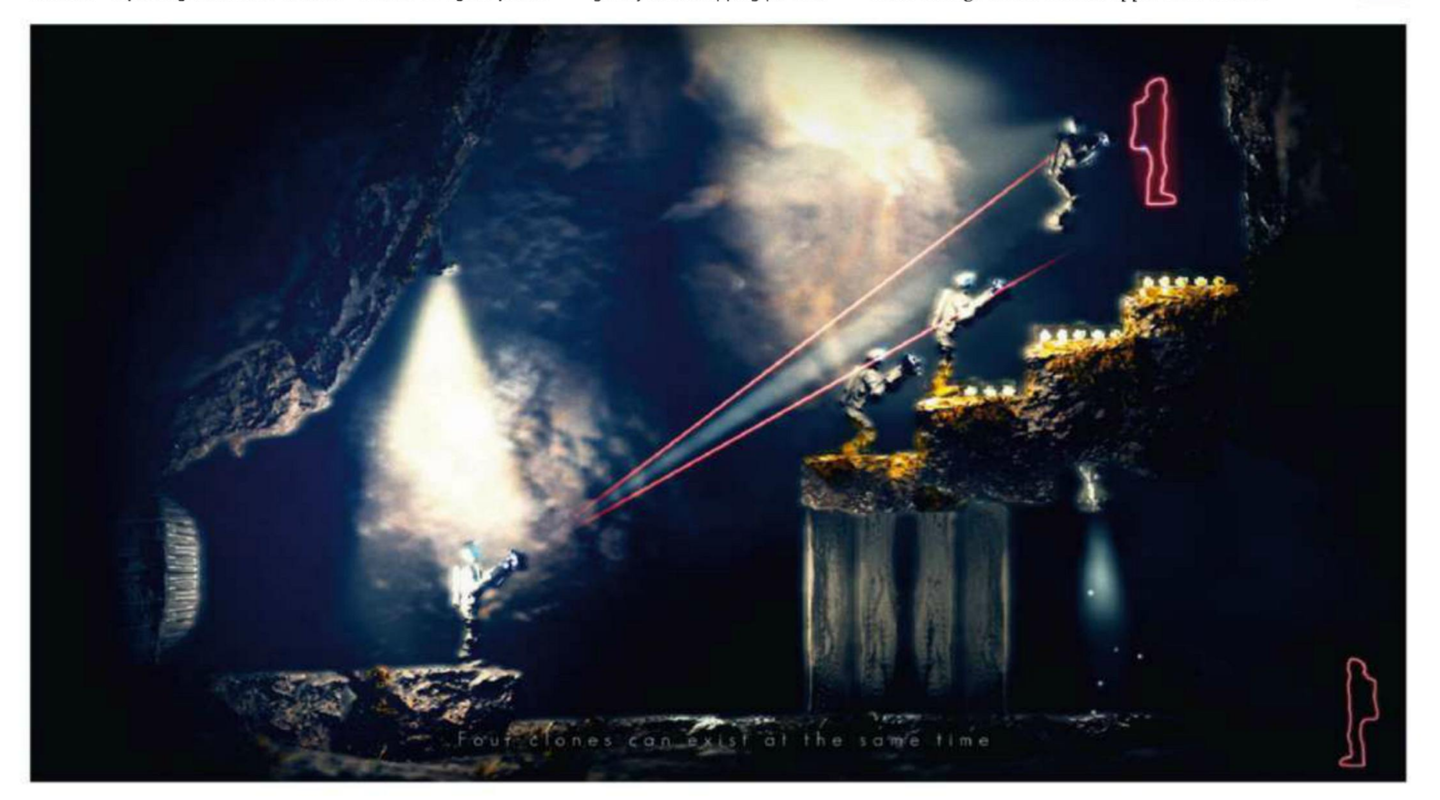
7

While you can have up to four active clones simultaneously, the game occasionally contrives rooms that require a clone to be left behind at the entrance – depressing a switch, for instance – to allow for tighter puzzles

Publisher Facepalm Games
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now



SPACE WALTZ
The Swapper's a resolutely focused game, and almost to its detriment, in that by the end of its short length the game has wrung its central mechanic dry. Still, it does allow itself a few moments of zero-g relaxation. In space, the Swapper gun's primary fire is repurposed as a means of propulsion, letting you elegantly float your way through the void to your destination. Sadly, Facepalm resists the urge to set up gravity-free swapping puzzles.



Stickets

Publisher Wanderlands Limited
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

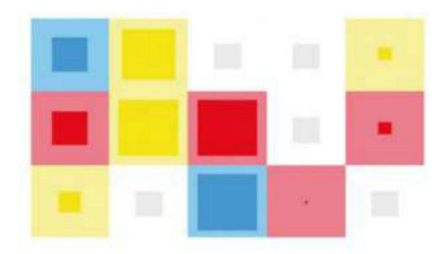
Stickets is the puzzle game boiled down to its most rudimentary form, but it's a reduction that only intensifies the taste. The presentation is minimalist, artfully disguising the astonishing depth of flavour: rarely have such familiar ingredients been so expertly combined.

It begins with an empty five-by-six grid on which to place L-shaped pieces comprised of three blocks of different colours – one each of red, yellow and blue. Points are awarded for each piece you successfully add, while three or more adjacent blocks of the same colour can be tapped away to create more space until there's no more room.

There's nothing more to it, but that's all *Stickets* needs to exert a muscular grip on your time. It demands a cautious, unhurried approach, yet the game over screen always arrives alarmingly quickly. You'll formulate strategies and abandon them within seconds. Such limited space means a wonderfully uneasy tension hangs over every move; the knowledge that you're only ever a step or two away from failure forces an almost comical level of deliberation.

Then, just as it begins to yield, another mode unlocks and changes the rules – not that this is required in a game that so elegantly demonstrates less can be more. Like all great puzzle games, you're beholden to the whims of fortune, forcing you into leaps of faith that often prove frustratingly fatal. But like all great puzzle games, *Stickets*' surface is merely a cover for mechanics of astonishing purity and longevity.

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Scurvy Scallywags

Publisher Beep Games, Inc
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Ron Gilbert's latest is a match-three puzzler with so many ideas crammed into its hold that it's constantly in danger of sinking itself. Happily, its systems are sturdy enough to keep it afloat, while its breezy piratical humour keeps the wind in its sails.

As ever, you swipe to swap, lining up three or more matching icons, and fresh ones cascade into the gaps you create. The direction of the swipe, however, determines which side the newcomers arrive from, giving you a greater degree of control over the grid, thus allowing you to avoid conflict with encroaching enemies – at least until you've swapped enough swords to increase your pirate's power rating above theirs.

Light RPG elements add further hooks: matching up coins gives you extra loot towards active and passive power-ups, while the rest of the items you gather can be sold. Pick up a chest from a defeated foe, or a present box, and you'll get to spin a roulette wheel, which holds items that can be used to construct a new ship. This offers more permanent buffs, as does a range of pirate garb.

Indeed, while a cooldown period prevents any one ability from becoming overpowered, Beep Games has been a little too generous with the assists; even taking accidental matches into consideration, the difficulty curve is shallow. Fortunately, it has a stream of Gilbert gags and musical numbers to fall back on, ensuring that just as the challenge eases off, the charm comfortably picks up the slack.

7



Kingdom Rush Frontiers

Publisher Ironhide Studios
Developer In-house
Format Android, iOS
Release Out now (iOS), TBA (Android)

As a rule, you probably don't want to experiment with your defensive fortifications. What if your tinkering were to let in some giant scorpions, or barbarian hordes? And that's probably why *Kingdom Rush Frontiers* is so conservative. Ironhide's follow-up to the best tower defence title on the App Store offers little beyond a refreshed enemy roster, tweaked tower functions and a shift to desert and jungle locations, but that doesn't make the studio's blend of strategising, planning and desperate micromanagement any less entertaining.

As with *Kingdom Rush*, you can only build fortifications at predetermined points on the battlefield, which shifts the focus onto what you'll build rather than where. The tactic of using melee troops to entangle enemy forces while archers and mages do the heavy damage remains unchanged. But *Frontiers*' maps throw enough unexpected challenges – enemies barging onscreen from new directions, or surprise bosses – to require constant use of your more flexible powers (such as disposable reinforcements you can spawn with a tap, and a hardier roving hero unit) if you're to stem the tide.

This core loop of planning and upgrading defences while plugging the gaps in your frontline is enriched by art that imbues surprising amounts of character into your microscopic soldiers, and sound design that turns the clash of swords and crackling fizz of magic spells into a compulsive symphony. It's not changed much, then, but we'll forgive Ironhide the second wave.

8



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things swells majestically to life on p108, where we ask BAFTA-winning composer Austin Wintory about the long road he walked with thatgamecompany to make *Journey*, and the job he pulled for *Monaco*. The parallel world of Termina awaits on p110, as we visit the oddest departure from *The Legend Of Zelda* series' norms, and explore why the setting made *Majora's Mask* worth revisiting time and time again. In the mood for conversation, on p112 we stick a finger to our ear and attempt to find the wavelength of the codec from *Metal Gear Solid*. Eidos Montreal, the new home of *Thief* and *Deus Ex*, is the subject of our Studio Profile on p114, where studio head Stephane D'Astous talks us through the pressures that come with continuing such revered series. Then The Making Of… on p118 revisits the rush of nostalgia and neon that was *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* to learn how to make a retro throwback in 2013. Our columnists provide some final thoughts, with Tadhg Kelly (p122) rediscovering the joy of gaming in small titles that deal with everyday tasks and quandaries, and Clint Hocking (p124) laying out the three filters he applies to choose what to play in the sea of shallow big hitters. Randy Smith (p126) takes the pulse of the industry five years after his first status check, and James Leach (p128) puts together the scariest game possible for gaming's key demographic, which is more horrific for what it says about an industry than it ever could be for players.



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Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon started as DLC, but action figures and '80s cinema helped it become so much more. Cruise the highway to the danger zone with this riotous homage on p118



People

AUSTIN WINTORY

A trip inside the mind of Journey's BAFTA-winning composer

Wintory is perhaps most recognisable to gamers for his work on *Journey*, but he's also an accomplished film composer, having written the music for 2008 Sundance award winner Captain Abu Raed

As Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, "Without music, life would be a mistake." But *Journey*, one of gaming's most potent reflections on mortality, had music long before it had life. "The piece of music that plays when you're on the XrossMediaBar before you launch the game – which is also the first track on the soundtrack, called Nascence – I wrote in early 2009, four years ago, the day [thatgamecompany] told me about the game," explains composer **Austin Wintory**. "Before Sony had technically greenlit it, and before even there was a prototype or any concept art."

On that day four years ago, creative director Jenova Chen called his old friend, the man who had collaborated with him as a student on *Flow*, into the company's Santa Monica studios. There he delivered not a technical but an emotional brief for the new game – the vaguest outline of a lone traveller in the desert and the feelings he wanted players to take away. Not everyone could interpret so loose a commission into a defining piece of art, but that's exactly what Wintory did. "So I walked to my car to drive back to my studio, and in a very unusual, and I guess very lucky, turn of events, the music just hit me like a flash. And so I left myself a voicemail kind of singing it, and walking through how I would arrange it. You know, start with a solo cello, then bring in a harp, and go to bass flute, and all this. And I had it all just suddenly in my head, so I drove back to my studio and I called my cellist, Tina Guo, and my flute player, Amy Tatum, and they met me at the studio about an hour later and we recorded Nascence. And that recording is what's on the soundtrack. I never re-recorded it, and it ended up being the basis of everything."

It was an exceptional moment, but a rare one – nothing else would come as easily. "The rest of the game was the opposite, very reiterative. [I was] constantly beating myself up and pushing it as far as I could possibly push it, never feeling like the music was going to be good enough."

Wintory tells us that the joke at thatgamecompany is that he would still be working on the score today if he could, refining it endlessly. But while in some mouths this would reek of false modesty, the truth is that Wintory is too engaged in his own work to be an accurate judge of it. Others can see what he cannot, his score netting gaming's first soundtrack Grammy nomination, BAFTA Awards for Best Music and Best Audio, and a Game Developers Choice Audio gong, to list but a fraction of its acclaim.

Such recognition highlights Wintory's singular talent for conceptualising and exploring a world through a musical lens. When asked where that initial flash of inspiration took him, he describes a process of musical inception. "Rather than drawing on an experience of having visited the Mojave Desert or something, it's more like I'm creating a fantasy in my head and then just going there musically, and working on it until it feels like an authentic experience. And then it becomes a fascinating phenomenon where you feel like you've gone somewhere, you've actually done something, because you took yourself in a very real way emotionally there. It's like Total Recall. If you implant a memory that never happened, but you have that memory, it's like it feels like it happened, so in a way it did."

Emotional, interpersonal connections are the defining theme of Wintory's career – which encompasses composing for games, films and The Boulder Symphony – affecting his work more than the inspiration of places or things. "I actually went to Jordan and walked through Petra while working on *Journey*, but I wouldn't say that influenced the compositional process at all. But visiting an old childhood friend who I hadn't seen in 20 years likely did. Things that have an emotional overlap are far more important than things that have superficial, physical overlap."

> "In a very unusual, and I guess very lucky, turn of events, the music just hit me like a flash"

And this philosophy bleeds through into the projects Wintory takes. A flick through the games portion of his CV shows numerous indie and small-studio titles – *The Banner Saga*, *Monaco: What's Yours Is Mine*, *Flow*, *Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards* – but no big-budget projects. It's not because large studios haven't called; rather, they haven't been able to offer the creative left turns and personal collaborations that Wintory, a restless creative, craves. "If I felt like I was doing the same thing every day… Some people regard it as getting into a groove, but for me it feels more like being stuck in a rut."

Seeking fresh challenges is how Wintory ended up working with *Monaco* creator Andy Schatz. The game designer wasn't looking for a composer, just for a little licensable music with a ragtime vibe. A mutual friend put the pair in touch, and Wintory leapt at the chance to provide a score, despite being mid-swing with *Journey*. "I emailed him back and said, 'You know, I probably have a thing or two that I randomly wrote in passing 100 years ago, but why aren't we talking about writing a real score that's just like that?' And he was kind of like, 'Can you do that? Do people do that?' And I was like, 'Hell yeah, are you kidding?'"

CV

URL www.austinwintory.com
Selected softography *Flow* (2006), *Horn* (2012), *Journey* (2012), *Monaco* (2013)






What seemed like a simple project quickly grew elaborate, since Schatz wasn't working with a music engine and every audio cue had to be hard coded into the game. The pair put a lot of work in to make it feel like there's a pianist in the room reacting directly to how you play. Look closely and you'll even see Wintory embodied in *Monaco* twice: once in The Gentleman's mansion, and again in a prison cell in the end credits, sitting behind his piano both times.

Which brings the composer full circle, because behind a piano is where Wintory found his life's defining ambition when he was ten years old. "On a total, sudden whim I started piano lessons, and my piano teacher said, 'What do you want to learn?' And I said, 'I don't really know, because I don't really know what's out there…' On our second piano lesson, he said, 'I'm going to bring you my favourite music,' and he showed up with some LP of Jerry Goldsmith's scores for Patton, A Patch Of Blue and Papillon. And when I heard those scores, I couldn't believe that people wrote music like that… So I just instantly was like, 'Oh my God. I don't know anything about being a composer, I've barely had one piano lesson, but I have to do that.'"

Wintory's own career journey since has earned him high praise, but he wants gaming's legacy to far outstrip his own. "My hope is that you look back 100 years from now and you say, 'Look at what they did on *Journey*. How adorable! What we're doing now makes that look like such a joke.'" ■



Places

TERMINA

How Nintendo made a brave new world out of bits we'd seen before

The Terminan fixation with magical masks seems appropriate for a game that took Hylian faces and used them in entirely new ways

From *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask*
Developer Nintendo
Origin Japan
First release 2000


The centrepiece of Clock Town is a statement of intent. Its mechanised clanking instantly contrasts with Hyrule's medievalism

Hyrule appears in almost every *Zelda* game, but Link has made only one visit to Termina. The setting of *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask* is an odd place: luridly colourful, more technologically advanced than Hyrule, but often creepily surreal. And Link's own journey through this otherworld plays out like a twisted fairytale. But for all its eccentricities, Termina is a place built from familiar materials. In fact, it's Nintendo's weaving of the familiar into its alternate universe that gives the setting so much of its power, and makes a virtue out of the asset reuse the game's swift development necessitated.

Termina's a mirror universe, a fantasy trope that should be familiar to fans of superhero comics, Star Trek or Doctor Who. But just in case players don't figure out what's going on during their initial stroll through Clock Town, they're soon taught that things they recognise might not behave the same.

Early on in *Majora's Mask*, Link journeys through the Southern Swamp, an analogue for the forested areas that appear in southern Hyrule. While there, Link crosses paths with a pair of witches, Koume and Kotake, the sight of whom should have players Z-targeting and readying Link's sword. Twinrova, as the hags are known collectively, served as the boss of *Ocarina Of Time*'s penultimate temple, and the pair are the surrogate parents of Ganondorf. But in Termina, the sisters are kindly crones who mix potions and run a shooting minigame.

The recasting of the pair from villains to friendly NPCs establishes Termina's topsy-turvy nature, and also allows for the exploration of characters who were little more than cackling villains in *Ocarina Of Time*. There's something sweet about the way that Kotake will shut up shop and go hunting for her sibling if you don't track down the missing Koume on the first day of the game's three-day cycle.

Majora's Mask has its own stories to tell, but almost all of them borrow from Ocarina Of Time's residents

Majora's Mask has its own stories to tell, but almost all of them borrow from *Ocarina Of Time*'s residents, be it characterisation or character models. Sometimes the doubling of NPCs is a background detail, a means of establishing the link between the two worlds. Hyrule's band of carpenters can be seen building the observation tower in Clock Town, while Dampé can be found plodding his way around the Ikana graveyard much as he does in Hyrule's Kakariko. At other times, model reuse provides a gag: a chatty banker, whose time-travelling current account Link must use if he doesn't want his savings to evaporate when he travels back to the first day, shares a model with a Castle Town beggar.

This general repurposing even saw one character split into two. Malon, the sweet farmgirl who reared Epona and eventually takes over Hyrule's Lon Lon Ranch, becomes the sisters Romani and Cremia (also ranch owners). The character models for Malon's youthful and adult self instead become that of a younger and older sibling with a host of problems and immediate access to all the emotional goodwill Malon earned in *Ocarina Of Time*. It's not just the player who makes the connection between the sisters and their Hylian analogue, either: in one of *Majora's Mask*'s many subtly touching sidequests, Epona goes missing at the start and finds her way to Romani, a Malon away from home.

Some characters feel more richly developed in the transition. Hyrule Field's Running Man, the NPC whose unbeatable abilities inspired a host of theories, found gainful employment in Termina, where his postman counterpart put that fleet footwork to noble use. It's this take on the character that has endured, with *Twilight Princess*, *The Minish Cap*, *Oracle Of Ages*, *Phantom Hourglass* and *Spirit Tracks* all featuring versions of the indefatigable red-capped deliveryman. Kakariko's Cucco lady saw her screen time upgraded significantly, too, as the female lead in a sidequest about a pair of star-crossed lovers.

There are plenty of occasions when Termina's trickery doesn't just revolve around characters, but entirely rewrites cultures and the contexts in which you'd find them. When Link previously met the Zora, the aquatic race's home was frozen over, and even before then the noble fishlike people had been rather chilly. Termina's Zora are more hedonistic, living in the sun-kissed Great Bay, and jamming on instruments made from the skeletons of sea creatures. Their neighbours, meanwhile, are the fearsome Gerudo, the mostly female race introduced to players two years before as a tribe of desert warriors, but now transposed to the ocean, where they've become crafty pirates.

Not every character is paralleled. Some of Termina's inhabitants, including its mayor, are true originals. Others share little with their Hylian counterparts except appearance. And then there's the bit players – the shopkeepers, minigame proprietors, and background NPCs – whose low-visibility roles often remain unchanged, though even this adds to the shared fabric of both worlds.

Termina is a very different place to Hyrule, its Expansion Pak-powered visuals adding vivid crispness to textures that draw upon a more surreal colour palette than *Ocarina Of Time*. It also cheekily dropped *Zelda*'s iconic landmarks; there's no Death Mountain in Termina, and no Lake Hylia. But it's the human geography that ties the worlds together, a vibrant cast of caricatures established with little more than crude animations and a few lines of unvoiced dialogue. They're the heart of both games, and the shared populace made both Termina and them feel more real. ■



Things

CODEC

Metal Gear Solid's radio conversations prove it's good to talk

Metal Gear's comms device has shifted in form over the series, from a radio to cochlear implants, but it's always provided humour, mission data and optional backstory

From *Metal Gear* series
Developer Konami/Kojima Productions
Origin Japan
Debut 1987

The Codec is the titanium-reinforced crutch of a series forever threatening to collapse under its mass of expository, acronym-laden dialogue. A direct line to Snake, Raiden, Big Boss and the player's ears, the Codec offers a convenient means of dumping the vast swathes of information that never seem to get whittled out of Hideo Kojima's scripts, and doesn't even offer a cutscene chaser to wash them down. This use of the Codec reached its nadir in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty*, where characters standing opposite one another would switch to the Codec to protect themselves from 'eavesdropping'. How could this work? They're still standing in the same room, talking out loud. You can picture *MGS2*'s exhausted cutscene animators shrugging carelessly as they massage the cramps from their hands.

There are times when Konami and Kojima Productions seem to acknowledge that Codec scenes and their radio ancestors are a bore. *MGS2* lets players subvert the seriousness of these dialogues by pressing buttons to zoom in on faces, or wiggle analogue sticks to move them. It's a typical bit of silliness, but it did turn *MGS* into what its detractors glibly described as the series that encourages players to listen to endless conversations while twiddling their thumbs.

Still, as tempting as it is to dismiss the Codec, *MGS*'s radio conversations are – alongside cardboard boxes, exclamation points and giant robots – a crucial part of the series' identity. More importantly, they're the means by which the series comes closest to reconciling its love of scripted dialogue with its interactive nature.

At least that's true for the optional ones. Players keen to get on with the action may rarely bother with its extra functions, but the Codec can make calls as well as receive them. Snake was running about Shadow Moses with access to a set of contacts long before Rockstar handed Niko Bellic a mobile.

There are scores of games in which the protagonist embarks on a mission aided by a support team delivering context and instruction into his or her earpiece, but *MGS* lets you actively choose to call on that support, and even provides a basic logic to what you'll hear and when you'll hear it. Equip a gun and ring weapons specialist Sigint in *MGS3* to hear an exhaustive rundown of its technical specifications as well as some more practical information. Enter a new location for the first time and you'll be given a briefing on what to expect if you call your CO. Call up anyone during a boss fight and you'll get relevant tactical tips or well wishes. There's a kind of contextual dialogue system at play in *MGS*; it may have a mountain of script to scale, but it also weaves player-influenced and -instigated conversations into an action game without resorting to dialogue trees.

The Codec allows players to tailor their experience, choosing how much background information they want to embellish the story with, and how much help they receive. One character in the first *Metal Gear Solid*, Ukrainian weapons analyst Nastasha Romanenko, is entirely optional: Snake need never hear an accented word from her unless you decide to seek out more background info on nuclear armaments or want operational tips for your FAMAS assault rifle. *Mass Effect*'s extensive Codex arguably performs much the same expository role as the Codec, but the latter ensures that Snake, Big Boss or Raiden functions as the vehicle for your curiosity, and keeps information seeking hemmed inside the game's present tense.

It's an easy way for the game to acknowledge that, yes, it has taken notice of your attempts to break it



***MGS2*'s fully modelled talking heads lacked the charm of *MGS*'s portraits. *MGS3* dodged this by offering 'photographs' instead**

Kojima knew players would visit the Codec regularly, though, because it also functions as a save screen. Calling Mei Ling, Rosemary or Para-Medic to save your progress applies vast quantities of C4 to the fourth wall, but just stops short of detonating it. There's something so reassuringly straight-faced about the way all three characters discuss the 'mission data' you're storing that the act of saving progress becomes, thanks to the Codec, a simple bit of military protocol.

Unless, of course, you keep calling Mei Ling and refusing to save until she gets fed up and sticks her tongue out at you. That probably breaks protocol. But it wouldn't be *MGS* unless the Codec was used for occasional levity, whether that's Easter Eggs like Mei Ling's anger, or overt digressions such as Para-Medic's long-winded chats about movies. Yet the latter serve a thematic function, firmly establishing *Snake Eater*'s '60s setting despite the game's jungle environment leaving Snake cut off from the prevailing culture.

Of course, the funniest Codec dialogues are the ones you have to work hardest to uncover: the throwaway conversations that occur when you push behavioural limits within the game, such as when you murder too many Huskies in Shadow Moses and get told off by your comrades. For a linear action series, *MGS* has always offered densely simulated environments, packing them with optional interactions and opportunities for mischief, and the Codec is an easy way for the game to acknowledge that, yes, it has taken notice of your attempts to break it.

It's these silly, extraneous conversations that frequently feature the series' best writing. Freed from explaining torturous double-crosses and convoluted plans, the Codec lets moments of human warmth and character seep into what are supposed to be lone-wolf sneaking missions. The Codec and the radio aren't just *MGS* at its most indulgent, they're its lifeblood-pumping heart. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Eidos Montreal

The Canadian studio reviving high-stakes series and championing a human revolution for industry working practices

1 The new *Thief* has attracted scepticism for Garrett's 'Goth' look, but studio boss Stephane D'Astous is all too aware of the master thief's legacy. 2 Rather than let *Tomb Raider*'s multiplayer be outsourced, D'Astous chose to keep it in the Square Enix family. He has plans for what his team learned from it, too. 3 *Human Revolution* was the studio's assured 2011 debut and a result of its remit to resuscitate beloved series



Founded 2007
Employees 500
Key staff Stephane D'Astous (general manager), David Anfossi (executive producer)
URL www.eidosmontreal.com
Selected softography *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Tomb Raider* (multiplayer)
Current projects *Thief*

Glance out of the sixth-floor window of Le Gordon Brown building, which houses Eidos Montreal's two-storey base near the city's festival quarter, and it soon becomes clear where the inspiration for *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s octagonal architecture came from. On the opposite side of the street stands a tall, rusty concrete building in clear view of the studio's artists and designers. Add a golden hue and a scowling man in dark glasses and the picture would be complete.

Of course, the importance of the studio's host city goes deeper than this. Montreal's supportive authorities, talent base, and mix of European and North American culture were all considerations when the UK-based Eidos began planning a new studio across the Atlantic in 2006. The man Eidos contacted to establish it was **Stephane D'Astous**, who at the time was working for Montreal's biggest game developer, Ubisoft. "We met up at the Montreal Games Summit," he remembers. "They hadn't finalised their decision between Montreal, Vancouver and Austin."

Once the UK board made its decision in January 2007, the process moved quickly, with the new studio unveiled publicly in February. "That's day one for our studio: February 15, 2007."

The studio's founders had grand plans from the outset, including the resurrection of two cherished series, but these were far beyond reach at the beginning. "You need to remember that I was the only employee in Montreal," says D'Astous. "I worked from home, in my basement, for four months. We found a temporary office in this building, on the tenth floor, while this office was constructed."

The plan was always to grow gradually, expanding as work demanded. Every year Eidos Montreal has rolled out into extra floor space. "We started off with half this floor," D'Astous says, gesturing past the glass walls of his office. "The next year we added the other half, and so on. It seemed logical, but if you see Warner and THQ when they came to Montreal, they built out the whole thing before having people hired."

D'Astous is a strange mix of pragmatism and playfulness. Bottom lines and business cases feature in his retelling of Eidos Montreal's history, but as he finishes explaining the prudence of a four-year plan to take over two floors of the Gordon Brown building, he also mentions the fire pole he had installed to connect one to the other (sadly never cleared for use, though he likes the idea of a coder sliding down in an emergency). Then there's the story of his first hire.

"I knew that I needed to go with a producer who would be able to bring over a lot of people with him. A person who influences, who has a good network. Normally these guys already have very good jobs," D'Astous laughs. In the end he chose David Anfossi, who he'd earlier hired at Ubisoft. "I remember, in my kitchen, I sat on my table and I was talking to David. And I said: 'David, I have a new challenge for you.' I made him guess which project it was, and it's funny because he thought it was *Legacy Of Kain*. When he knew it was *Deus Ex*, there was a little silence at the end of the phone call, and he said, 'Are you serious? Oh, man.' I knew by his reaction that I had him. And I knew that by having him, he would [bring] a good deal of his core team."

It wasn't just experience that D'Astous was after, but the willingness to be part of building a new operation. "They were coming here with temporary offices, and things were not well built out and established. But some people really appreciate having the opportunity, because that opportunity doesn't happen very often, to participate in the startup phase. You need to find the right people to do that."

"You can't put a cake in the oven at twice the heat and hope it bakes twice as fast. This doesn't work"

D'Astous outlined to these early hires the studio he envisioned. "I said to them: 'There are four major pillars in the studio.' We were only going to be working on triple-A. That meant no *Scooby Doos*," he grins. "We were going to work with the best tech. But the last two are the most important. We were going to be working with human-scale teams. And the fourth pillar is, I shouldn't say this, but a prolonged development cycle."

The final two go hand in hand. What D'Astous means by 'human scale' is that, even in the high-pressure world of big-budget development, each member of the team feels capable of making a contribution. "Initially, I wanted to do *Deus Ex* with 100 people. It grew to 142, but in Montreal that is quite small for a triple-A [game]. If we know guys over there [he waves a hand towards Ubisoft's Montreal base, which employs over 2,000], they have the muscle to put hundreds and hundreds of people on one team. And that's an approach we didn't want to bring over here."

The knock-on effect is that games take longer to make. "Fewer people," D'Astous agrees, "maybe just a little bit more time. It's like a cake. You can't put a cake in the oven, put it at twice the heat and hope it bakes twice as fast. This doesn't work. Everybody has tried it in the industry. Everybody."

Eidos Montreal's plan seems to be working. It released *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in 2011 after what many saw as a prolonged four-year development, but balanced exceptionally the demands of the original's vocal fanbase and the expectations of wider audiences. The game earned it an **Edge** Studio Of The Year award, and *Human Revolution* saw over two million sales.

Recent reports from unnamed sources have painted life at the studio in a less flattering light, however, claiming that progress on the studio's latest game, a remake of stealth classic *Thief*, has proven far more problematic, with stories circulating focused on alleged office politics and difficulties associated with the exit of senior staff. Among the anonymously sourced criticisms, the suggestion of collegiate favouritism caused by the bulk import of teams from other studios seems to hit closest to home. D'Astous dismisses the severity of the accusations, though. "We've seen stories like this for many other games before; sure, we've had some bumps in development like in any other triple-A major project, but it wasn't as dramatic as the article tried to suggest. *Thief* is a reinvention of the series, not an iteration. These things take time, and there's always a bit of trial-and-error involved. We've managed to do it with the *Deus Ex* franchise, and we have the intention to repeat the same success for *Thief*."

The studio has certainly earned credibility with *Deus Ex*, and succeeding with *Thief* will demand a similar creative feat, given that both games emerged from the same influential group behind Looking Glass Studios and Ion Storm. In fact, D'Astous says, this shared history was partly why the games were paired at Eidos Montreal's inception. "It was a humongous challenge: the background, the legacy, all the baggage behind





Both *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (left) and *Thief* are Eidos Montreal's takes on games that emphasise player choice. But when the latter comes out in 2014, it will have to contend with the memory of *Dishonored*, which took the *Thief* series' pillars and updated them masterfully

those two projects. These communities are very vocal, very protective, they really believe in their games, and we need to manage this in the best way we can. On *Deus Ex*, we really wanted to work on this, because Warren Spector wasn't here, Harvey Smith wasn't here, [or] Doug Church… We needed to convince the community: 'We totally respect this franchise, we don't have these people on board, but give us a chance.' I think we really worked well with the community. We spoke to them, we exchanged with them, we told them things we weren't going to do that they wanted us to do. Every week, I receive an email: 'Please redo *Deus Ex 1* and reskin it.' No, we won't do that. I hope people understand why. We're in business to progress."

The other reason for keeping these games together was that they present similarly intricate development challenges, and Montreal offers a huge bank of expertise. "We really thought that the people in Montreal would be a good fit to do these types of games: a little bit complicated to make, a little sophisticated. I think the people at Eidos back then thought, basically, 'If we want to be successful, the best bet would be Montreal. We could build up quite rapidly a studio that would be able to handle these big, monstrous franchises in a certain way'."

"We won't redo and reskin *Deus Ex 1*. I hope people understand why. We're in business to progress"

D'Astous sings the praises of Montreal as a base for development, listing not just the proximity of other studios and the 9,000 workers they support, but governmental help in the form of tax breaks, as well as satellite industries such as animation and filmmaking. He calls it an ecosystem of innovation and creativity, in which he focuses on individuals and teams. It's that pragmatism again: people often think of particular designers and writers as making games, but a general manager's work means tipping the odds in your favour by submersing projects in as big a pool of talent as possible.

Its location isn't the only cause for D'Astous to think of his studio's role as part of a bigger whole. Eidos Montreal also forms part of Square Enix's global development group, and works closely with Crystal Dynamics and IO Interactive. The Square Enix takeover happened in April 2009, although D'Astous claims the impact, beyond a number of delegations from Tokyo, has been negligible. "I think Square Japan really understands and has confidence in our methodology. We've proven we're able to deliver great games: *Deus Ex*, *Hitman*… In the triple-A scope of deliverables, they totally understand we're capable. So we need to improve on maybe more predictability, on better budgets and all that. But our pipelines aren't that bad – they leave us to work with confidence."

Sometimes, other Square studios turn up seeking help. "People at IO, they cannot hire 50 people in six months – it's a different reality in Copenhagen. At Crystal, they're also faced with that reality. They cannot explode a new team. So often we are looked at: 'Can you guys help us out?'"

This is how the studio came to be responsible for the multiplayer portion of *Tomb Raider*. During the presentations at a Square Enix greenlight meeting, Crystal Dynamics studio head Darrell Gallagher outlined plans to outsource the mode, but D'Astous stepped forward and said that his studio could handle it. "This is something I thought it would be bad to outsource," he says. "I always saw the great advantages, even though it's a great challenge, to create a team specialised in multiplayer. We know that at Square Enix/Eidos, multiplayer is not one of our strengths. I have no problem in facing that fact. We have very, very deep singleplayer games with great characters. That's why we're able to have great movies of our games. But in multiplayer, we have a lot of things to build."

The studio was able to create a team of 40–50 people in six months to complete the online section of the game. That team is currently working on *Tomb Raider* DLC before moving on to an unannounced multiplayer project.

As well as the multiplayer team, Eidos Montreal houses *Thief*'s developers, Square Enix's centralised QA team, an R&D unit and developers making two unannounced games. Maintaining the promise of human-sized teams sometimes means saying no to corporate requests. In autumn 2011, happy with the success of *Deus Ex*, Square Enix suggested expanding the studio by another 250 people. "I said, 'Yes, I want to increase, but not in one location,'" says D'Astous. "Because we were already at about 350. By growing by 250 more, it would just become a factory. So I suggested, 'Let's split the growth in two. I'll take half of it; [with] the other half, let's do another studio.'" A sister studio, Square Enix Montreal, was born to take control of the *Hitman* series, sharing back-end HR, IT, and finance support with Eidos Montreal.

But stewarding such large series is only one of the studio's challenges. D'Astous discusses the hurdles involved in tackling new business models. "Free-to-play is a totally different adventure… Let's say we offer a seven-course meal. You pay $60 or $70 [and] we'll give you a seven-course meal. With free-to-play, we give you the salad, and if you like it you'll ask for more. This is totally different. The designers need to scratch their heads and say, 'I need to sell my seven-course meal with a salad?' This will change things."

In other words, having just established itself as a studio able to compete effectively in the big-budget space, Eidos Montreal is now facing reorganisation. In line with its humanistic ethos, however, it's a thoughtful one. "I don't think it's going to be overnight. We have a good period of transition, and we need to look at how we need to change our deliverables now, so we don't get caught in a time trap where we will need to make decisions too fast. Right now, my boss, Phil Rogers, and the other GMs are really looking into what is the best, most intelligent way to turn the traditional triple-A disc into something more contemporary, meaning maybe less investment from the consumer at the start." ■



Stephane D'Astous
General manager

We ask the self-described proud father of Eidos Montreal about protecting developers as humans, what he hopes players will take away from his studio's work, and the influence the development philosophies of the revered Ion Storm and Looking Glass have had on his studio's careful updates of the *Thief* and *Deus Ex* series.

Your team seem unusually relaxed and open. Does that come from you?
Well, I'm glad it transfers down to my guys, because I have a tendency to be transparent. I worked at Ubi for three-and-a-half years, and it was a little bit different. When we started here, one of my things I wanted to do is to have higher accessibility of the people in the studio in different ways. Let's be relaxed and have fun. We do open houses here, once a year, at the week of the Montreal Games Summit in November. The first year, we received like 700 people in seven hours. The next two, three years, we went up to 800 people in a day.

You're clearly aware of the hours people put in. How do you manage a long, high-pressure schedule?
First of all, it has to be a team effort. In any team, there are guys and girls who are ready to do outrageous amounts of hours. Sometimes you need to say, 'No, go home now. Because the hours you'll be putting in now are not productive; you're just kidding yourself.' So, yes, at the end we did work very hard, for example, on *Deus Ex*, and we think we brought the Metacritic a little bit higher because of that. But we didn't actually crunch like crazy [in] the old-fashioned kind of way. We didn't crunch for, let's say, the last three months. We semi-crunched at the start of alpha; we semi-crunched a couple of weeks at beta. We tried to spread the effort. It has to be voluntary. You cannot force anyone to stay in late, so the ones that are here understand the situation. They're here because they understand we need them, and they're eventually compensated at the end, because we have a system that allows them to take time off afterwards.

The studios whose games you're remaking – Looking Glass and Ion Storm – had well-articulated philosophies of design. Is there much discussion of your creative philosophy at Eidos Montreal?
I think the word 'experience' is really important to us. That's why we [even have] difficulty to categorise our games [ourselves]. They're deep in a lot of points, they're character-driven, and they're story-driven. The pillars just to come back to *Deus Ex* – there were three or four different ways to play the game, giving that choice to players of how they want to experience the game. And once they have experienced it, we hope it's memorable, and it's an experience they will be able to talk about – almost like reading a good book, or 'I just saw the best movie.' We want our consumers to say, 'I just played something and I'm going to talk about it for quite a while.'





From one man to a two-storey studio, Eidos Montreal has grown rapidly. D'Astous is keen to keep the team lean, though, and not overstretch



THE MAKING OF…

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

How Ubisoft Montreal's bombastic shooter made nonsense make sense

Creative director Dean Evans was thrilled when players spotted the link between *Blood Dragon* and *Metal Gear*'s NES cover art, which borrowed a lot from a Michael Biehn Terminator press shot

Format 360, PC, PS3
Developer Ubisoft
Publisher In-house (Montreal)
Origin Canada
Debut 2013

Appropriately enough, Michael Biehn's *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* story begins inappropriately. "The first time I masturbated," creative director **Dean Evans** told the actor before a crowded auditorium, "I was watching you bone Linda Hamilton in The Terminator." Evans tells us that afterwards he "basically ranted at [Biehn] for about an hour on what the game is and what the concept is, and yeah, he was super down with it".

At the end of July, Evans will be celebrating Biehn's birthday with him, almost exactly a year after that off-colour conversational gambit at Montreal's Fantasia movie festival. Back then, *Blood Dragon* was already in production at Ubisoft Montreal as downloadable content for *Far Cry 3*, and Biehn – who starred in Aliens and Navy Seals – was quickly sold on playing the role of its protagonist, Sergeant Rex Power Colt. "The idea was to have the '80s as a backdrop, and Michael was so important to that," Evans says. "So many modern shooters are really trying to push the envelope with regards to narrative and emotional content, but the game design isn't changing. We play a lot of these modern games and they still feel like you're taking part in an '80s action movie, so I just wanted to embrace that."

Eighties action cinema is a powerful antidote to ludonarrative dissonance. Were Nathan Drake an '80s action movie star, the hundreds of men he slays with a machine gun and a wisecrack would seem perfectly reasonable. Rambo III, Red Dawn, American Ninja and Invasion USA all have body counts of over 100. John Matrix kills almost single-handedly 102 of the 109 men who die in 1985's Commando, but even that bloody rampage falls short of most modern videogames. So when *Far Cry 3*'s Jason Brody graduates from trust-funded college boy to hunter-shaman by way of a body count in the thousands, it's barely credible, whereas in *Blood Dragon*, Evans explains, "It's OK because I'm a cyborg and the universe is fucked up."

And that was essentially the pitch for *Blood Dragon*, a fictional '80s action franchise that had long since run off the rails. "[*Far Cry 3* producer] Dan Hay was looking for some kind of DLC extension," says Evans. "I think those words were really interesting: 'some kind of', as in we're not limited to just doing an extension of the full game, or just putting in some new multiplayer maps. He approached me and said he wanted something, [and this is] the most horrible phrase of all time, 'out of the box'."



Dr Carlyle's cyber soldiers are pure '80s budget movie design, a mix of motorbike leathers and an LED-obsessed props team

On the first slide of Evans' pitch was the word 'nostalgia'. It was followed by stills from Commando, Predator, Missing In Action and – long before Biehn was on board – Navy Seals, Aliens and The Terminator. The game references included *Doom*, *Wolfenstein* (specifically Mecha Hitler), *Shadow Warrior* and *Rise Of The Triad*. "So many shooters are still *Wolfenstein*, still *Doom*," Evans says. "They shoot you with a shotgun, there's an animation reaction and then you're back in your combat stance. I think that will stand out in a harsh fashion when the next gen comes along. Try to make a serious game where they want you to care about the character, but you have to go murder 200 people along the way... You have infinite bullets in your pistol? What? You're a bullet sponge, but you're told you're a human? What?"

> "This game is made for gamers by gamers. It didn't get put in front of focus groups. Fuck that"

The levity of '80s action cinema let Evans' team do "whatever the fuck we want. From day one, what I've been communicating to the team, and everyone at Ubisoft, is to not look at *Blood Dragon* as a videogame set in the '80s, but as this action property that's gone off the deep end."

Evans points to RoboCop, an 18-rated action flick that begat a kid-friendly film in which RoboCop can fly, has a gun for an arm and fights ninjabots. "And then the TV show comes out, and it's like, 'Oh my God...'" he continues. "So imagine there have been a few Blood Dragon movies and an animated show already, and they've been successful, and the game is the point where Blood Dragon goes RoboCop 3."

The game Evans pitched would be an ultraviolent '80s action movie with a disregard for body count, the trailer would be composed of scenes from the fictional animated series, the 2D cutscenes would be torn from the '90s movie tie-in game, and the final sequence would feature the Battle Dragon, which Evans describes as "just a commercial for the Blood Dragon action figures".

Such references went further than the pitch. "It [was] important to get everyone on the team in that correct mindset when working on the game. I busted out all of my old He-Man figures, so everyone on the team had their own totem. Everyone got to pick their own figure. Someone got a broken Prince Adam. That was a shame. I got Beast Man and I put him on Battle Cat. We picked up a bunch of old Genesis games, so the artists could look at what old covers and logos used to be like. The desert chrome lettering [we used for the logo] has such a classic '80s and early '90s feel. I was showing everyone in Canada why Mega Drive is better than the Genesis, because it says 'Mega Drive' and the logo is absolutely killer in desert chrome."

Long before anything bar the action figures and Mega Drive boxes were in place, Evans' team had contacted Australian electro duo Powerglove. "David Lynch said it years ago: sound is 50 per cent of everything. The music was the first thing we did. When you don't actually have any visuals yet or assets, there's no better way to get your team on board than by having them listen to the music nonstop."

Powerglove had provided the soundtrack to a furious shootout in the 2011 exploitation movie Hobo With A Shotgun. Evans was taken with the band's work instantly. "My brain was on fire. Why don't we ever hear this stuff in videogames any more? Back in the day, we had fucking speed metal! We had techno! *Streets Of Rage 2* was acid house! Today we have quite flat, ultimately forgettable orchestral scores, but if I'm going around shooting cyborgs' faces off, I need the beat to accompany that."

A simple test was applied to everything the team squeezed into the game: "Think of yourself at 12 years old. Would you think it was cool?" So ninjas, cyborgs, shuriken, dinosaurs, *Mortal Kombat*, and nuclear war were in. When Colt reloads his shotgun, he spin reloads it like Schwarzenegger in Terminator 2. It's one of only two ways to reload a shotgun according to Evans, the other being Linda Hamilton's one-handed pump at the end of the same movie. The game's arsenal also includes Jesse Ventura's Predator minigun, RoboCop's Auto 9 pistol, Clarence Boddicker's Cobra Assault Cannon, and a laser rifle based off the future Terminators' guns in T2. Every outpost's name is a reference to

a movie: Shakma Station, Hauser Labs and Danko Base. Bad guy Sloan has a robotic jaw, wears a chainmail vest and has a necklace of ears – a blending of characters from He-Man, Commando and Universal Soldier. The game's crouch icon is the Terminators' time travel stance from the first three movies. Fire Colt's minigun and he'll scream with rage as he cuts cyborg soldiers down. "That was from *Metal Gear Solid*," says Evans. "That was a thank you to Mr Kojima."

Blood Dragon's team grew from around 25 to over 80 as staff crossed over from *Far Cry 3* to *Blood Dragon*, and along the way the game grew beyond the bounds of its origins as downloadable content. "Throughout the whole production, we made some of the worst decisions you could make, to be honest," Evans admits. "For DLC, the smart thing to do would be to reuse the assets and reuse the weapons, but every single decision was, 'Let's really do something different,' so it was very strenuous for everyone on the team. Obviously, we kept the core of *Far Cry 3* in there, but after that we just went crazy."

Blood Dragon retained *Far Cry 3*'s levelling and base-capturing mechanics, but replaced almost everything else. Its aesthetic meant creating a new island setting as well, a wasteland under darkened skies painted in purples and greens and blues. "These days dystopian futures are desaturated and monochrome, but back then they were really colourful," says Evans. "There was one great image we referenced from the first Terminator movie of the future war when the Terminator is shooting his laser. Then there was the front cover of the movie The Wraith, which we referenced a lot. *Double Dragon II* and *Streets Of Rage 2* were a big influence in terms of the colour palette, too. Yes, it's dark, but it's supposed to be. There are places where the lighting makes no sense, but that's how movies work."

Even the core of *Far Cry 3* was overhauled, with Evans' team truncating the levelling system, stripping out the radio towers and supplementing the original's outpost assaults by surrounding every base with an anti-dragon shield you can disable to attract any 30ft laser-eyed dragons wandering nearby. "It's actually a pretty complicated creature in terms of its design and its mechanics and AI. We worked with some of the team who worked on the animals in *Far Cry 3* – a few of the guys based in Shanghai – and our first prototype was just a scaled-up komodo dragon. The biggest challenge was this thing being able to navigate around the environment, because it was so huge. We had to work out the metrics, then make sure level design and art were adhering to those metrics. But we knew from the start it was going to work, because it's a fucking massive neon prehistoric creature that fires lasers from its eyes."

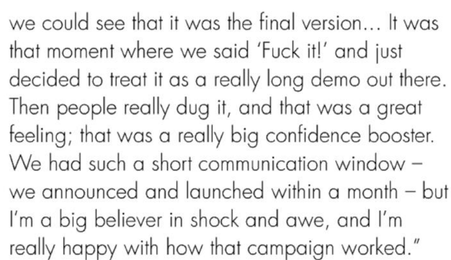
Blood Dragon was already one of the industry's worst-kept secrets when Evans and the game's product manager embarked on a promotional tour in April. In the middle of the UK leg of Evans' tour, however, the whole game appeared on file-sharing websites.

"We had to change our underpants when we got the news that the PC version had leaked," says Evans. "I have not felt like that for many years. It was just a feeling of dread coursing through my veins, because we had no idea what version had leaked. It could have been a PC build from two months before, or a brand-new build. We just didn't know. But when the forums started to light up, and everyone was making GIFs, and we could see that it was the final version… It was that moment where we said 'Fuck it!' and just decided to treat it as a really long demo out there. Then people really dug it, and that was a great feeling; that was a really big confidence booster. We had such a short communication window – we announced and launched within a month – but I'm a big believer in shock and awe, and I'm really happy with how that campaign worked."

When *Blood Dragon* shipped as a standalone title, critics praised it for its personality and atmosphere, but questioned it for its uneven tone, its abridged version of *Far Cry 3*'s levelling, and its script, which features a heavy reliance on sexually themed jokes. Evans, meanwhile, has no doubt in his mind about the problems really hurting *Blood Dragon*. "Time was the problem on everything we did, and we had to cut stuff," he says. "The cuts that were really upsetting were the classic Dirty Harry .45 Magnum; the .45 Longslide with laser sight from The Terminator; the Uzi from, well, everything; and Snake Plissken's MAC-10 with the suppressor and the strap. Colt would spin it around, and wrap the strap around his hand. I was sorry to see that go. If there's one thing I'm super pissed that we didn't have, it's a body count. I think maybe we could have pushed forward the arcade style a little bit more. Maybe put a score in the corner of the screen. And there's one thing that's a huge regret. Huge. That's the one thing I really wanted to tell you: we're missing the roundhouse kick. I so wish we had that in there, the Jean-Claude Van Damme split kick; the one where as soon as he does it, you need to show it again four times from different angles. We're totally missing it."

It seems indulgent, and is, but Evans questions if that isn't how development should be. "This game is made for gamers by gamers. It sounds so cheesy, but it really is true. It didn't get put in front of focus groups. Fuck that. I think it would be fantastic to give triple-A talents that opportunity to flex their creative muscles and go crazy sometimes. I think that's the glory of our medium. There shouldn't be any rules and conventions. We should just be able to fuck around and do what we want. I feel like we're coming back to that mid-to-late-'90s feel with a lot of shooters, and I hope it continues. I think in the future, if you want to really make something of narrative worth, you have to align your narrative intentions with the gameplay realities. I'm excited to see what happens with games like *The Last Of Us*, and I think that [need for alignment] will allow for more weird, abstract junk games like *Blood Dragon*." ■





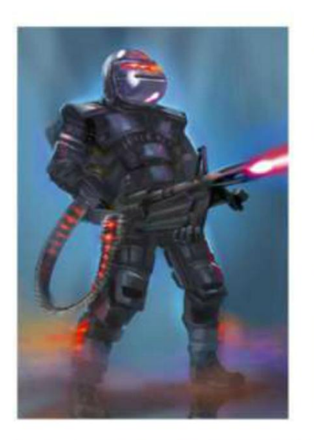
Q&A

Dean Evans
Creative director, Ubisoft

What made the '80s setting so important?
Nostalgia is a powerful thing. For a lot of us [the '80s] were our formative years, and it was nice to come back to that. I think when I look at the formative years of my gaming – not just movies and comics and cartoons and toys and stuff, but look at the games I was playing during my early teens – there were games with very similar tones to this, and a similar attitude, a similar pace. I've missed that – having a game where you can run super-fast and you're almost in god mode the whole time.

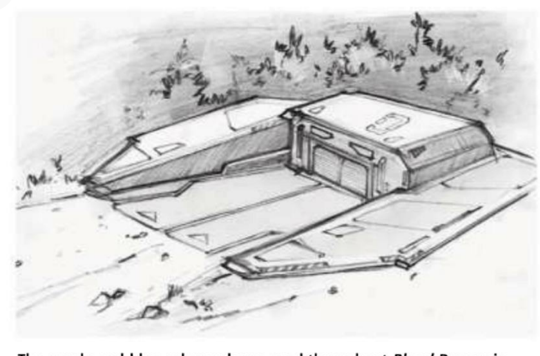
Did you face management opposition?
A lot of the people had been in the business for a while, so when you start showing screenshots of the original *Wolfenstein* and you show Hitler in a mech, [they're] still there, tucked away in people's minds. It's one of the most absurd things around, but it kickstarted this entire genre, and it wasn't even that long ago either. It wasn't that tough to sell it to direct management.

Were you concerned by the one-month promotional schedule for the game?
No. I think the shortest one I can remember was *COD4*, which was about six months. Look at the success they had there. We were lucky [product manager] Roy [Del Valle] and I were allowed to go off and do our thing. When you just have such a short amount of time, the more people involved in it, it's just going to fuck everything up. We really kept it pretty tight, and ran a nice rogue and renegade operation.







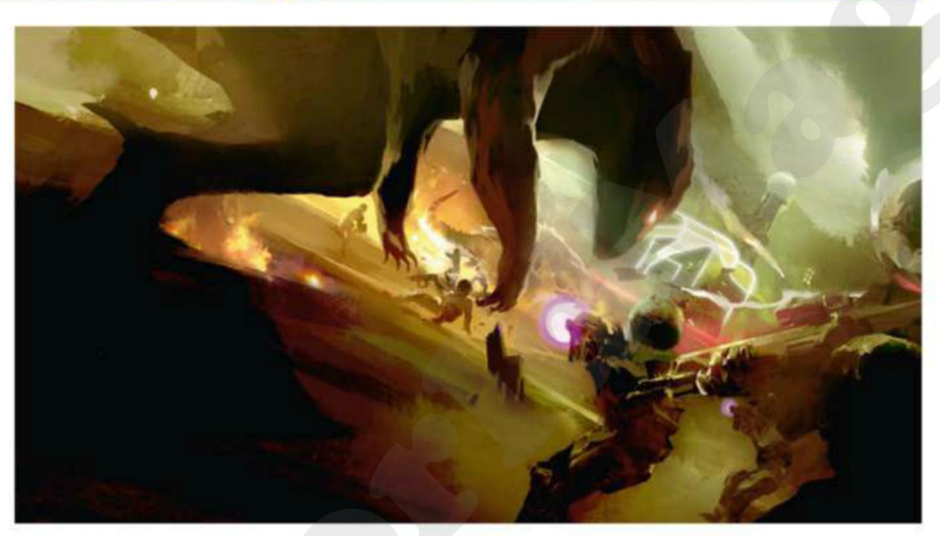


The purple-and-blue colour scheme used throughout *Blood Dragon* is a reference to several action movies from the '80s, but perhaps the most notable is Charlie Sheen-starring car chase flick The Wraith



Personality Colt

Michael Biehn jokes that IMDB is the worst thing to ever happen to him, because "everyone can see how much shit I've been in." Evans wouldn't deny it: "He's been in some absolutely wonderful trash. He's had a hard time through the years, and I really feel like he's happy with a lot of the attention he's getting. There are a hundred people who have come up to him and have said, 'Whoah, Rex Colt, man!' Rather than, 'Whoah, Hicks!' It's the first time for a long time that he's been recognised for something else other than his classics." Biehn has also voiced characters in *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun* and *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, but for *Blood Dragon*, Evans explains the actor was "channelling Plissken and Eastwood. His voice is actually a lot higher than that. He sounds the same as he's always sounded, but for this one we wanted to make him feel like it's the future! He's a mark IV cyber commando; he's been through a lot. He's war torn in this one."



Early art had the dragons in place, but hadn't yet found the game's distinctive hues, or fully given in to its neon obsession

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The power of little thauma

Perhaps it's a time-of-life thing, or maybe overexposure to the same ideas, but it takes a lot to make me want to be a hero these days. It's just so tedious to be faced with the prospect of slogging through hordes of nameless drones on the way to saving the world, especially if this quest will be dressed up in fantasy, hokey sci-fi or military fatigues.

I've seen all these worlds before, been all these roles and worn all these suits. Like any genre of anything whose ideas are overused, I'm too familiar with them. Now all I see are nudges and influences so blatant that I can pick out not only the games that inspired them, but the games that inspired those games. I just don't believe I'm anything other than a walking drone, and that's OK, but it doesn't exactly capture the soul.

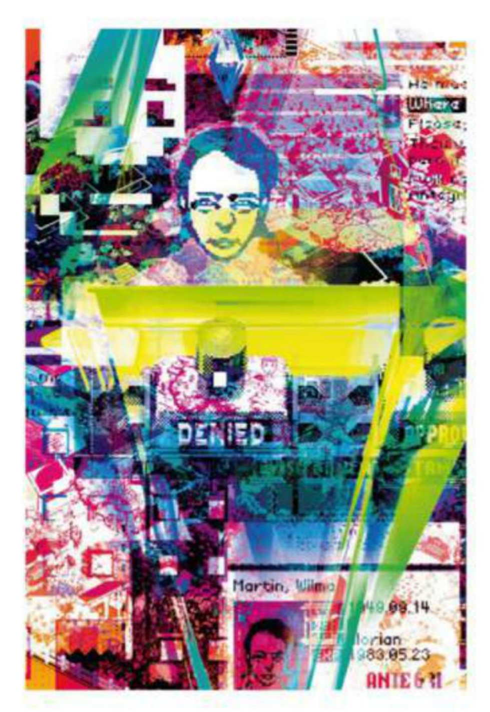
I should know better, but I had felt for a little while that there was no longer a game that could enlighten my soul. Perhaps it's an offshoot of writing about games so much, often critically, that you become inured; if you're not careful, you find yourself trapped in a negative space where failure only reinforces failure and there are no surprises.

Happily, I'm not there yet. I was just looking for my thaumas in all the wrong places. Where I had been looking at the grand sweeping epics, I just needed a dose of the small, the little, the inconsequential and the ordinary. Most especially what I needed was Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*.

In Pope's world, I am not a hero. I am a low-level customs officer, and my job is very simple: to check the papers of a variety of entrants to my fictitious (yet amusingly Soviet-era like) country. My job is to catch the wayward, arrest the suspicious, and grant visas to those deserving. All in order to pay my rent and the medical bills of my family.

And here's where it gets interesting: although it may sound similar, *Papers, Please* is not a kind of *Diner Dash*. It's not frantic, and the interactions do not boil down to a series of abstract fetches. No, I open passports, look at entry visas, examine dates and pay attention to rules of the day. I do the job.

It's like one of Ian Bogost's persuasive games in some respects, in that as various entrants come to my desk, they tell me their stories and I am left with moral choices. One example is a young woman who fears she and her sister are being trafficked, and she gives me the name of her pimp. She begs me not to allow him through, since he will hurt them, but his papers are all in order when he arrives at my desk. What do I do?



Is there anything wrong with talking about little games, or a reason it's always the histrionic ones that get the spotlight?

Games with small subject matters have always had their place. From the simple joys of playing landlord in Monopoly through to the modern day of *Papers, Please*, there is often a singular joy to be found in the small situation. Relatively mundane tasks, such as running a studio in *Game Dev Story* or delivering the news in *Paperboy*, can provide wonderful experiences.

A lot of that is probably to do with resonance. In *The Sims*, a game built almost entirely out the mundane, Will Wright managed to attract millions of players to the idea that they could live middle-class digital lives and experience a new kind of joy. People saw something of themselves in those Sims, and this is a pattern that's been repeated over and over, primarily in casual games.

For example, one of the most popular kinds of game out there is one in which you run a virtual farm. Whether we mean *FarmVille* or *Hay Day*, what are we actually talking about? Gardening. Creating small plots of tilled land. Planting and harvesting. And this ordinariness appeals to millions and millions of people every month.

There is tremendous value in the everyday, yet that value is not blockbuster-friendly. When E3 rolls around, games about the ordinary don't tend to get featured, and instead become the curio pieces columnists write about in the backs of magazines. Furthermore, unlike other media, such games receive relatively little recognition; nobody that I'm aware of has ever seriously considered a farming game for Game Of The Year.

One the greatest works of literature is the story of two men walking the streets of Dublin in 1904, but is there any game with suitably microscopic subject matter that does likewise? Is there anything wrong with talking about such little games, or a reason that it's always the overblown and the histrionic that get the spotlight?

We need to celebrate more games like *Papers, Please* or *Cart Life*, games where the mechanics of life become the mechanics of game, and the choices presented can be true quandaries. We need to talk about ordinariness in games as a valid part of what they are. Some of the most interesting choices come from very ordinary places. Do I choose to be kind or not? Do I choose to stamp a piece of paper one way or another? Do I choose to ask a question, or just rush someone along for expediency? These are the sorts of interaction that a little thauma is based upon. I may find out the consequences of my little action later, or I may skip on by obliviously. Not only am I playing the role of bureaucrat, I'm actually behaving as one. I'm there in that world every bit as much as I am supposed to be when I'm saving humanity from some universal threat whose name I've already forgotten.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com



In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Three filters for choosing games

Truth be told, I think I've become jaded. Perhaps it's because the console cycle has gone on too long and developers are doubling down on their successes, trying to build their war chests for the next generation of games, when they will need to experiment to recapture their audiences. Perhaps it's because I am a father now and my priorities have changed; I don't have as much time to browse through a wide range of games in search of curious design experiments that portend the future. Perhaps it's because the 'capital I' Industry is so badly broken, its focus now on making larger and more content-centric games with bigger budgets and higher production values, games to which companies hope players will be attached for longer.

Whatever the case, when I sit down and look at what my gaming options are, I increasingly feel like the majority of games are not worth the time or the effort. I now probably spend more time looking for games to play than playing games. This is not unlike the feeling I had for many years when I subscribed to cable television. I would flip through the channels looking for something interesting, stopping every time I looped around through the 80 or so channels to look at the listings, see that there was nothing really on for another 30 minutes, and then click some more. Of course, there were lots of things to watch – 80 of them – but none seemed worth watching.

But recently, as I scanned across a row of unopened 360 games on my shelf, trying to decide which one to play, I stumbled upon what would become my criteria for deciding which games to spend time with. I came up with three filters that I feel a game should be able to pass in order to be genuinely worth playing.

The first filter is: does the game have a coherent theme? Theme is embodied in the dynamics of play, and if the game has a story, it should be carried through in the story as well. Making a game where theme is expressed in dynamics and narrative is exceedingly difficult and notoriously unsuccessful from a critical and financial perspective, so it should not be surprising that the number of existing triple-A games that pass this filter can be counted on my fingers. Of the unopened 360 games on my shelf, zero of them qualify. This doesn't mean continuing to try to make more coherent games is fiscally irresponsible – on the contrary, creating thematically coherent culture is probably, in the long run, the most profitable thing you can invest in. It's also worth noting that in the indie space, a great many more games are at least striving for thematic coherence; perhaps 15 per cent of indie games are trying to push the medium forwards in this way.



Creating thematically coherent culture is probably, in the long run, the most profitable thing that you can invest in

The second filter is: do I care about this theme? Jason Rohrer's *Gravitation* is a game whose dynamics are about trying to manage the needs of your creative career and the needs of your family. When I first played the game in 2009, I 'got it'; you have a child that needs attention, and you have creative urges you need to follow. The two needs draw from one another and feed one another. It's a good game and well designed, but in 2009 I didn't care about these themes. I played *Gravitation* again last week after talking with Kent Hudson about the themes of his upcoming *The Novelist*, and I realised how relevant those themes were to me now that I was a father. So while this filter is important, it's also variable, and whether a game passes the filter or not can change over time with life experience, interests, or even just my mood on any given day.

The third filter is: does the game add anything to my appreciation of these themes? In general, this question is impossible to answer until I have played it, so perhaps a more useful filter would be: is the game likely to add anything to my appreciation of these themes? Regardless, I'll leave it as is, because I will likely play any game that gets past the first two filters, and I find coming back to this question helps me better understand what good games are and how they work.

Even though conflict, struggle, victory and defeat are central to most games, it is hard to imagine a videogame that could speak to the themes of the honour and the pride won through struggle and defeat with the sophistication of Homer's Iliad or Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea. That said, our filter is not whether a game is better at addressing these themes, but rather whether it adds to our appreciation of these themes in a way that other media perhaps cannot. With that in mind, I feel that games like *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Demon's Souls* perhaps succeed to some extent in broadening our experiences in worthwhile ways.

I find it interesting that when I first articulated these filters, I felt certain that I was listing them in order from least to most strenuous. Certainly, this would be the case for any established medium, yet for games it appears to be the opposite.

Fortunately, all we need to do to rectify that is endeavour to make thematically coherent games that pass the first filter. The other two filters fall naturally into line after that. I can't imagine anything that would transform our medium more powerfully or positively than that.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve Software. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

What's our status?

Back in the autumn of 2007, I opened my first **Edge** column by asking about our status. When people 50 years into our future look back on us, what will they say about games today and about us as caretakers of the emerging medium? Is this a golden era, or a time of stagnation? Perhaps we're unknowingly on a wave of rapid advancement that's about to crest? Fifty years seemed like eternity, which makes it unbelievable ten per cent has already passed. So how has our progress bar moved?

Seeking perspective on that question, I reread every **Edge** column I'd written. In the beginning, I was brimming with enthusiasm about games as an artform, the unique abilities of our medium, and our potential to convey meaningful and resonant human experiences. I was agitated and rallying against the tedious dogmas and ruts of the powerful, risk-averse industry that seemed to have our medium in its death grip. How encouraging that ideas that back then seemed prohibitively unconventional are now an active frontier. We have games without score or even goals that leverage minimal graphics to inspire the audience's imagination, that refuse to coddle the player with fairness and clarity, and that reexamine what narrative means in our medium. Like never before, games are being created and appreciated as art, not just entertainment with a price tag. As a creator who works in these spaces, a player who craves these games, and a media theorist who cares about our evolution, I feel grateful to be involved with this movement.

When I started writing, I was working with Steven Spielberg at Electronic Arts, but the years saw me depart for an indie career, found a studio, and collaborate on two successful games that in many ways were developed right here in these pages. My first few columns glanced across the surface of material borrowed from my favourite game scholars – Church, Hocking, Lantz, Hecker – but that was quickly exhausted. Writing for **Edge** became my laboratory for investigating game design's most compelling and troubling questions. Why do games have to be fun? Why are games dismal at creating emotional attachment? Why is violence so prevalent? How does eating chicken heal injuries? Each month was an exercise in converting hunches and intuition into deeper understanding, of analysing the subject until I could articulate it, of clarifying my own values. This column is where I learned game design all over again, and applied it back into my practice.



How encouraging that ideas that back in 2007 seemed prohibitively unconventional are now an active frontier

I had a mission statement: express burning passion for the not yet fully realised potential of games; be supportive and optimistic, but critical when appropriate; respect the audience of intelligent game enthusiasts. Each column should itself qualify as interactive entertainment. 'Interactive' by being inclusive, asking questions, and requiring interpretation. 'Entertainment' by being irreverent, witty, and playful. I wanted to push the boundaries of what can be considered a column, and **Edge** deserves recognition for being accommodating of my crass humour and experiments. It boldly printed screenplays, text adventures, religious passages, and even a nonlinear pile of notes. My favourite columns are ones that checked off each of those objectives.

Lately, my tone has become drier, because I'm old now and don't like jokes any more. And with all this positive momentum, where do I find enemies to crusade against? I never was a 'have an opinion every month' kind of guy. I was energised mostly by the reckless expedition into a shifting horizon.

Look, what I'm trying to say is goodbye. I don't know who you are, but I've been writing to you for five years. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have embarked on this adventure and seen it to the end. When I spent days breaking down some theoretical problem, I needed to know someone would respond to my interpretation. When I haemorrhaged emotion about silly old games, I needed faith that someone out there believes in them as much as I do. Writing to you has been an honour and one of the highlights of my career.

But the moment has come when I'm done talking. There's an infinity of topics I want to understand about game design, but getting there will require practice more than writing. Perhaps you've noticed my columns lately have tended back towards a handful of recurring topics, in a few of which – despite years of remarkable achievement – it feels we've advanced hardly at all. What's a game system that empowers character interactions that players author themselves? How do we make our medium portray personalities as expertly as it conveys physics and environments?

So, what's our status? Oddly, a low number represents hope. Hope that despite every glowing memory, every cherished experience, every stunning accomplishment, the best is yet to come. My answer in 2007 was five per cent. Today, I might give us six per cent. Because maybe that wave really is about to crest. Maybe this whole thing has been one observation of a new beginning. I couldn't be more excited to discover where the future takes us.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n


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JAMES LEACH

Chilling by numbers

Recently, someone I used to trust told me that I was about to be terrified by a game. I was led to a darkened room at night to watch, and indeed participate in, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*'s Die Rise. It is, as you might know (but I didn't), set in a post-apocalyptic anarchic city un-peopled by undead blah blah zombies and blah blah desperate survivors.

It turned out to be quite a good *COD* map, actually. I was as mediocre at it, as I always am. But the one thing it wasn't was terrifying. This isn't me trying to show how tough I am. I really did want to be chilled or creeped out, and the late-night setting where we were playing was highly conducive to this, but the truth is it didn't work. I think it didn't work because it was trying too hard. It's as if the developers listed all the creepy things they could ever think of and arranged them in a smorgasbord of spookiness. There were chilling radio messages, trapped survivors, odd noises and jump moments, but I think it was all too much, like the haunted house at a funfair.

Of course, scariness often operates on the less-is-more principle. A little odd thing in a familiar world is usually better than serving up a full-on goremageddon wave of mutilation. Back when Stephen King was writing great books, he knew this. Sit yourself down, create a richly woven tale of all-American childhood, and then pop a clown in the storm drain. Job done.

Still, throwing manifold frightening things around can work; I was chilled by a lot of *Silent Hill 2*. Man, that air raid siren. But *Silent Hill 2* quite often does something else. It sets up the jump moment and closes in on the inevitable jump, and adds some discordant music and… doesn't deliver. This confounding of expectations shreds the nerves like cabbage, and is topped off with a proper jump when you least expect it.

Are these sorts of games aimed at me, though? Like it or not, the youngish male is still the target demographic, as the marketeers say. And I'm no longer youngish. However, the target demographic for zombie horror flicks is almost identical: youngish and predominantly male. So frightening post-apocalyptic zombie worlds are exactly where the audience want to be, and it's what frightens them, being youngish and all.



Frightening post-apocalyptic zombie worlds are exactly where the audience want to be; it's what frightens them

Older players are more terrified by endowment shortfalls, black ice and enlarging prostates.

So let's make a scary game for the target audience. Firstly, zombies or aliens? Both. Dead aliens, rotting, that have been reanimated. Tick. Now, do we set it in a post-apoca-whatsit city or crashed/abandoned spaceship? City. We can have ruined churches, and as everyone knows, ruined churches are spooky. Like ruined asylums and hospitals. We can have those as well. Now, music and sound effects. For music, we need discordant buzzing and the odd bit of lone echoey piano. Oh, and slow, off-key nursery rhymes. And sound effects? Badly tuned radios are good. Dripping water, banging pipes, wind and, of course, whispering. Oh, and something that sounds like a metal dustbin falling down a stairwell. They all have that.

This is going well. We wake up with amnesia. We have to piece our life together, while fending off helpful, kind people who turn out to be zombie aliens. How are we going to tell this story? A ripped journal? Pages strewn across many ruined churches? No, that involves reading. The youngish don't like reading. How about a photo album? A futuristic one with short video clips of how life once was, how the dead aliens mucked it all up, and how they can be defeated. Yes!

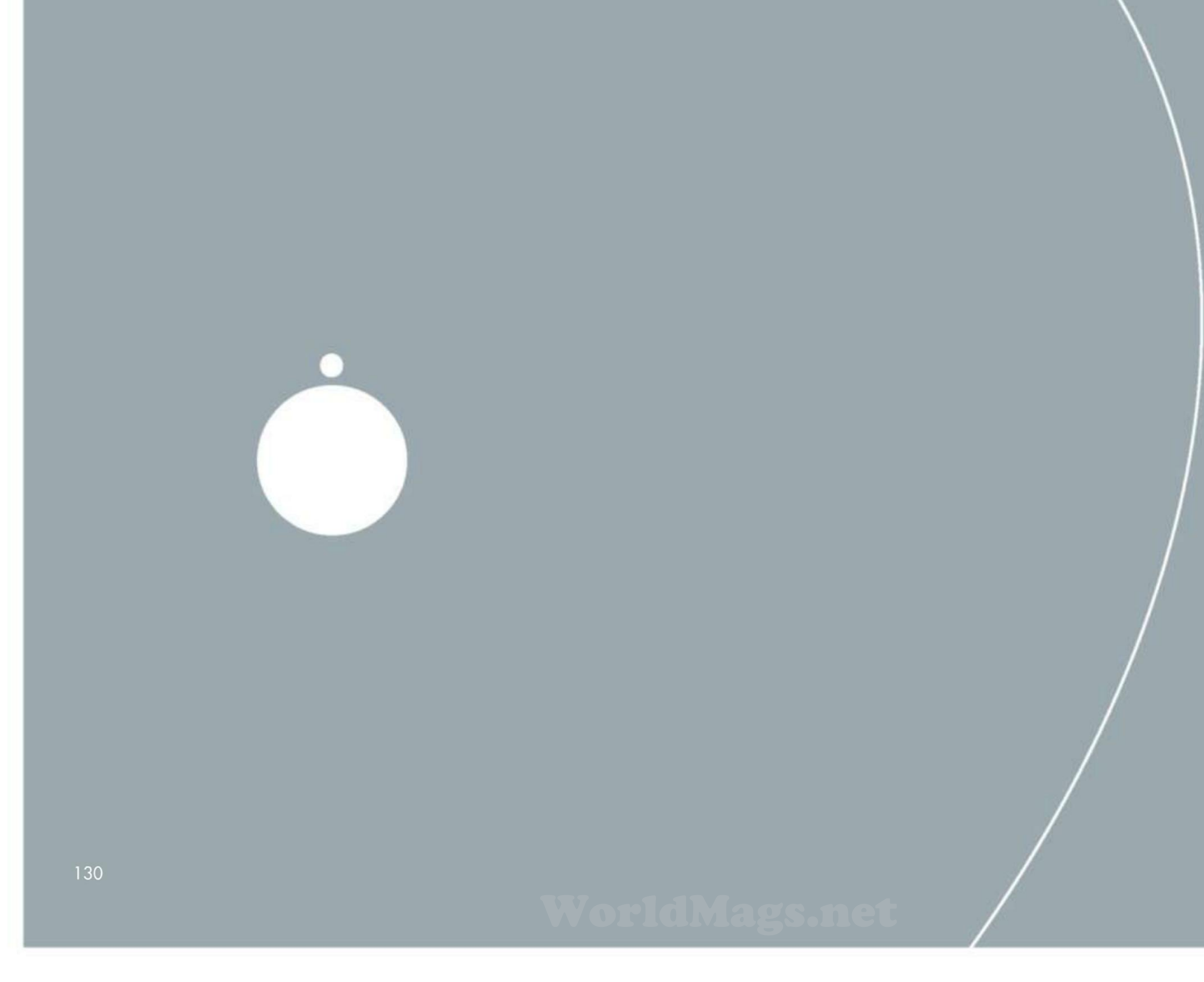
Other characters: a dead wife or girlfriend or significant other? She's not dead; you have to find her. But the twist is, when you do, she's ungrateful. Because she's a zombie and you have to kill her. But how about another, feistier love interest? She's the leader of the non-zombified resistance. She can test your commitment to your undead wife. Wow, we're getting emotion in this thing.

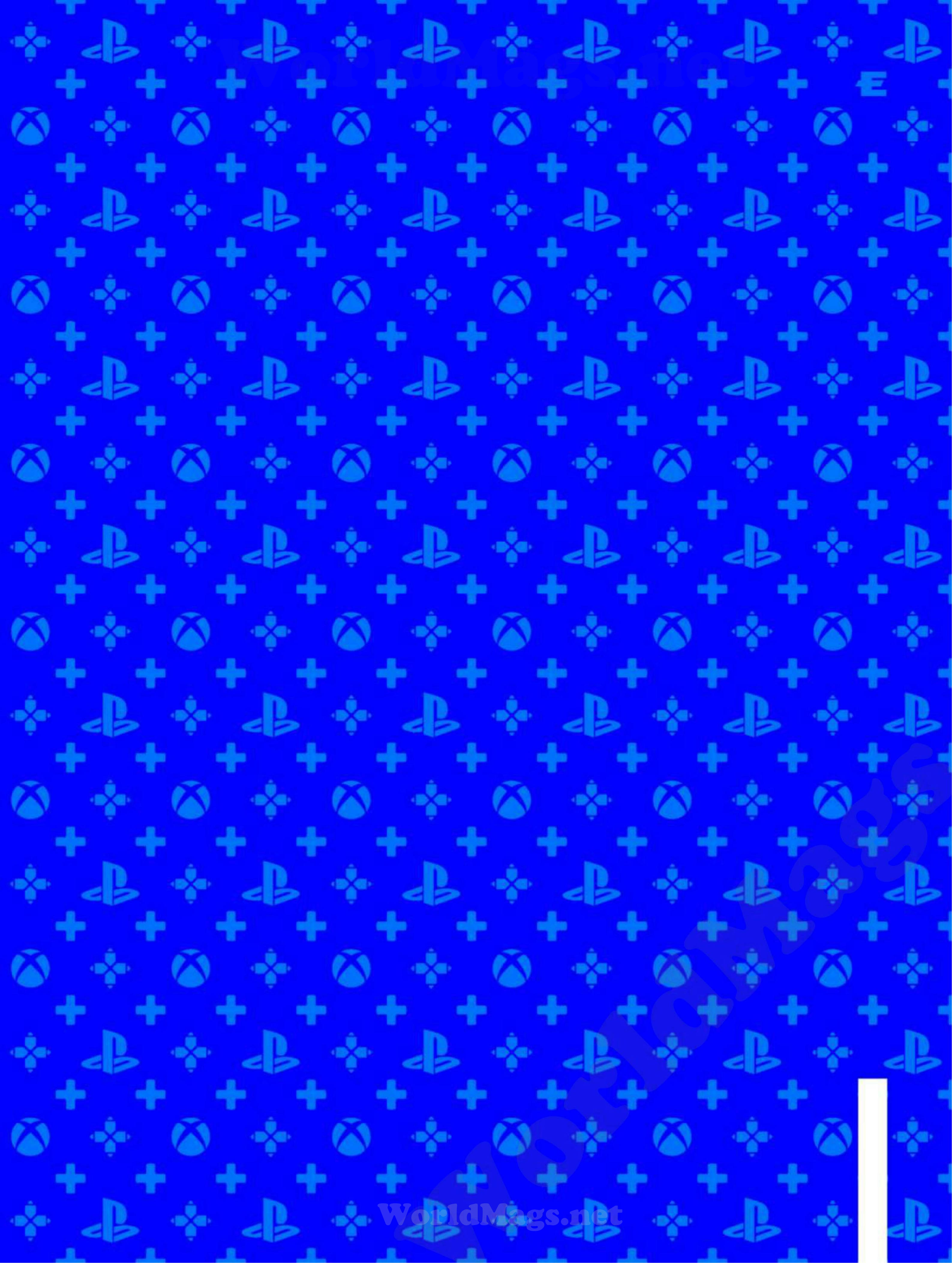
Now we need another member of the zombie-battling resistance. Colonel Traitor. He's a highly effective warrior and knows every inch of every ruined hospital and church. You trust him with your life and he doesn't let you down. But, and this is going to be good, Colonel Traitor is on the side of the zombies. In fact, he's the godson of the man who runs the company that engineered the poison that causes all aliens to become zombies. He's realised that in order to get it into good chemists, he has to show he's conducted due diligence testing of it. Which is why you are currently in a post-apocalyptic world. Twist: he doesn't know his godson, Colonel Traitor, is there and fighting the zombies. His godson loathes the old man and is actually trying to bring down his company and save everyone. The real bad guy is… feisty love interest. She's also a Mortomorph Mutatastasis. We can work out what that is later, but she's a dead alien in Holly Willoughby's body.

Oh, you know what we've forgotten? What every zombie game in the world has to have by law? A little girl. An emotionless little girl carrying a torn teddy or doll. She is the creepiest thing in this game. She is the key. We won't put her on the box, though. Remember the demographic.

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